

Walk On/To the Usual Suspects

What follows is a version of the text of *The Usual Suspects* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998), which appeared in a revised and expanded U.S. edition called *Walk On* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002). Both bombed. This text is a mixture of the two, with a few additions.

Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Ascent
- 3 Calamity
- 4 Cheek
- 5 Community
- 6 Cross
- 7 Darkness
- 8 Friendship
- 9 Hope
- 10 Identity
- 11 Joy
- 12 Life
- 13 Love
- 14 Realism
- 15 Remembering
- 16 Repentance
- 17 Retro-reading
- 18 Struggle
- 19 Tears
- 20 Trust
- 21 Turbulence
- 22 Vocation

1 Introduction

This book looks at some basic questions about being Christian and being human which I have tried to think about for one reason or another over recent years. To signal the acknowledgment that they were postmodern-style soundings rather than a systematic presentation of an organized whole, I decided to arrange them in alphabetical order.

None of us understand ourselves, and usually anything we say about ourselves has to be taken with a block of salt. It is always wise to assume that there is a lot more iceberg below the surface that we cannot see than there is above the surface that we can see (as Freud said, I suppose). Further, when people give you the impression that they are being amazingly open about themselves, it is a wise assumption that there are lots of other things that they are being careful to conceal. There is lots of invisible iceberg that they are well aware of and intend to keep concealed, at least at the moment. I know that is true of me.

With those health warnings, I tell you that over the past decade nothing has been more influential on the shaping of who I am, what I do, what I say, and what I write, than my wife Ann and the coping with her multiple sclerosis and increasing disability that we have to do together (and some of it apart). Everything I write is in some sense hers too, even the abstruse academic things, because I would be a different person were I not

married to her. The fact that I would be much more of a bugger if I had not had to live through the last ten years with Ann does not make her illness any easier to accept. In some ways it makes it grimmer: why should I get a bit less immature at her expense? But in other ways it takes the edge off the grimness.

Once Ann herself hoped to write something about her experience of illness, but the very progress of the illness itself has made that impossible. I have often thought that one day I might do that, and I have suddenly realized that this is the moment. At least in part this is because we are at a moment of transition in our lives. We have been in St John's Theological College, Nottingham for 27 years but are now moving to Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California.

Ann stands within the frame of all the chapters that follow, sometimes visibly, sometimes invisibly. She drives me back all the time to basic questions about what it means to be human with God. When it is some other context that presses a question, she provides key elements in the subconscious framework within which I think about it. In important ways I fail her but at least here I acknowledge her

Ann

Ann and I met over a boiled egg (well, two) at a Christian students' conference in April 1963. The boiled eggs were soft on the outside and hard on the inside; I always wondered how they did that. I was wearing my name badge upside down as some way of drawing attention to myself and to my uncooperative instincts, and I succeeded; but Ann and I were both involved with someone else at the time. Each of us returned to the next year's conference looking for the other.

I had a bad conscience with regard to that previous romance (indeed I still have) but at least I could claim that I was now uninvolved. Ann could not, which gave her an anxious train journey at the end of that vacation back from Stockton-on-Tees where her parents lived to London where she was a medical student, in case there were two young men waiting for her at King's Cross. I was the only one who turned up, so I won. Next term I took my final exams for my theology degree; she sent me a red rose each day that week.

Another April day two further years later I went to spend a day with her on the eve of my last term at in Bristol before I was ordained. It was a warm Sunday evening as we left her flat in Hampstead with some friends to walk to the underground to get to evening church. As she crossed the road she was limping. Good medical student as she was, she had made the most alarming diagnosis possible, though she was un-histrionic about it. She believed she had disseminated sclerosis, as it was then called; I do not know why "multiple sclerosis" in due course became the normal term, as the disease itself became better-known. It involves (I expect she told me) a malfunctioning of the nervous system which can affect different parts of the body and result in those parts not responding to messages from the brain. Next day she walked into the ER at her own hospital and reported her symptoms and diagnosis. She was treated with due skepticism but by the end of the week was proved right.

The next Sunday I hitch-hiked to London on another lovely sunny spring day to see her in hospital. I felt a strange joy and was not at all surprised to get a lift in a sports convertible on the edge of Bristol which took me all the way to London in one go. The medics had started Ann on a course of a drug whose initials are ACTH and which was something to do with pigs' bladders. This did the trick (how they discovered it would do so I have never known). After a few weeks she was walking normally.

The strange joy came to be associated with three passages from scripture. One was brought to our attention by Alec Motyer, Ann's rector and before that my inspiration,

mentor, and role model as Old Testament theologian (he would want to disown some of my thinking now, but he still loves us). He must have gone to see Ann in hospital and then written to me, and he included an allusion to a passage of scripture that he happened to have been reading that day, the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee, where one of the guests comments, "You have kept the good wine till last." God does that, Alec commented. It has been an important promise, though not one yet fulfilled except in paradoxical ways.

The other two passages made variations on another point. I wrote them on the flyleaf of a book of Alec's expositions of Philippians, *The Richness of Christ*, which I gave to Ann; they make we weep now when I spot the inscription/dedication, along with some more personal words to the woman I loved. One of the passages was a phrase from the letter, "For me to live is Christ" (Phil 1:21). The other was some words from Psalm 73, which tells of someone's agonizing about the tough side to life which had nevertheless led to the realization,

I am always with you;
 you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
 and afterwards you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you? –
 and earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
 but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.

Both summoned each of us to make God the one person who counted, so that the other human being whom we loved did not become an idol. It was much easier to mean those words then than it has been to mean them during some of the subsequent years.

The following April Ann had another relapse of the multiple sclerosis, this time affecting her eyes, but again the ACTH did the trick. At the time we were "unofficially engaged"; I am not sure whether this category of relationship still exists. It meant we knew we were committed to marrying each other, and we believed that this was God's will, and our commitment was a semi-public fact, but Ann was not wearing a ring. The reason was that her parents disapproved of me. This was partly because they disliked some aspects of my character (I was not respectful enough or formal enough), but partly because they were very fond of their only daughter and were sad at the prospect of losing her.

During this spell in hospital, a charge nurse told Ann that she had no right to get married with an illness like hers, and certainly had no right to become a mother. The words still haunt Ann, and make her wonder whether she did the right thing. In a sense, questions like that are pointless, of course. A few years ago, before appraisal as such was invented, we had on the Seminary faculty a peer review and support system which we called "triads," despite the word's connotations of Chinese mafia. Each year one would review the previous year and discuss work and personal issues with two other people. One year things with Ann had evidently been tough and we had discussed this and how I coped, and the then principal's notes of the discussion said something about my nevertheless affirming that I was still glad that I had married her. That did not seem quite right. I do not mean that I was not glad, but that this was somehow not the framework for thinking about the matter. When you discover that the person you have fallen in love with has an illness such as multiple sclerosis, you cannot then have a solemn discussion about whether you are glad you fell for this person or whether you should decide to terminate

the love relationship. Or at least, I could not do that. To ask the question is to deny the reality of what has already happened, it is to deny yourself.

As it happened my tutor at seminary had a wife with a chronic illness, and I remember a Friday afternoon that summer when he also went as near as he could to inviting me to reconsider whether I wanted to take on what I might be taking on. I think I somehow knew that I would only understand what he meant when I was thirty years older, the way you only understand who your own parents were when you are a parent of teenagers and adults yourself, and I knew that then it would be too late, or rather that it was already too late, and that he knew it was too late, but that he still had to say it. And I am glad that he did, not because it was any use to me then, but because it is of use to me now somehow to know that he knew how it would be for me and knew the pain of it but knew that I could not get out of it (and I wish I had found a way of telling him before he died). Because relationships lay necessities upon you. You cannot go back on the commitment of love without betraying yourself as well as the other person.

I do not know whether that nurse did well to say the equivalent words to Ann, those words that still haunt her. When Ann says them to me again as she does from time to time, one thing I say back is that if she had not married and become a mother, Steven and Mark would not have existed. They might be prepared to view that as a shame, as might their own lady loves. I was reminded of this when Ann and I went the other day on a rehabilitation center outing to see the film *One Fine Day*, in which one divorced parent is asked by her son whether she still loves his father and she replies "I will always love him because he gave me you."

Ann and I always say how grateful we are to God that Ann was so well all through Steven and Mark's childhood, but I know they were aware of Mommy having this illness, and that they paid a cost in some sense. One year when Mark was seven or eight, Ann had a spell in hospital and her mother was staying with us. She made a remark about "When Mommy is better." Mark said quietly, "Mommy will never be really better." A little while after, when Steven was in his early teens, I was taking him to see Ann on the occasion of a subsequent spell in hospital. As I drove and he sat in the back seat, I asked whether he worried about her, and he said "Well, yes, I do really." I didn't know where to go with the conversation from there, though I now realize that there was some kind of inner link between that moment and an occasion more than a decade later when Ann had had the seizure I refer to in a moment and Steven and I stood outside the University Hospital in Nottingham and wept on each other's shoulder.

Yes, they have paid a cost. But I also tell Ann that whatever cost there might have been to them in their mother's having this illness, it is more than counterbalanced by the potential positive shaping that it will have effected upon them, the sense in which it has contributed to the making of them as human beings, as it continues to do to the shaping of me.

We actually married six months after that second spell in hospital during which the staff nurse issued her rebuke. Within weeks Ann was unplanned-ly pregnant. She was on the pill, a novelty in the 1960s, and allegedly the innovation that was taking all the worry and hazard out of sex. The day after a visit to the hospital which established that Ann was indeed pregnant, the *British Medical Journal* carried a report of some research suggesting that the particular pill Ann was taking was not as "safe" as some others. We were already in a position to confirm that.

Ann's parents were livid with me (!). I kept thinking that it could not have been worse if we had been unmarried. But they had always been looking forward to their daughter qualifying as a doctor and coming back home to practice, and I had imperiled that first by marrying her and then by getting her in the family way.

But there was a more serious problem. Pregnancy and giving birth are big strains on a person (nothing to parenthood, though, I am tempted to add, but that's probably a male perspective). Stress is a major factor in precipitating relapses of multiple sclerosis. Ann's neurologist (one of her own lecturers for whom she had great respect) took the view that Ann had no business having a baby within months of a second attack in a year, and recommended she have an abortion; it was 1967, the year of the passing of the Abortion Act.

We thought and talked and prayed, as you would, and eventually asked for second opinion. We went to see another neurologist, who declined to demur from his colleague's recommendation but was a model in the way he put the facts before us in order to help us make our own decision. The decisive comment for me (though Ann doesn't remember this bit) was that it was clear from Ann's notes that she had had these attacks of the illness, but that from examining her he could find no trace of its affects. He could not remember seeing someone who had had two attacks of the kind that Ann evidently had had, and who was now as well as she was. I did not infer that she had been "healed" in the sense that she no longer had the illness, but it was enough as a sign that we were to trust God for the future.

The pregnancy proceeded uneventfully, as far as the illness was concerned (Ann had blood pressure and was in hospital for some weeks to keep that under control, but this can happen with any pregnancy). One Monday at 3.00 a.m. the hospital rang to tell me I had better come now if I wanted to see the action. I remember sitting at traffic lights on the Holloway Road in London wondering whether it was really necessary for them to take so long to change at 3.30 in the morning (I recall being tempted to ignore them, but I cannot remember whether I did).

In those days it was not customary for husbands to be present at births, but as a medical student Ann had pulled strings. I had always said I did not really believe what one was told about where babies came from because it seemed implausible. Ann was more concerned for me to see with my own eyes and then shut up than to have me holding her hand. By 7.45 I was convinced, and was back at Morning Prayer in church in Finchley. I have a more vivid memory of bringing Ann home from hospital a few days later. Steven had quite long finger nails at birth and was inclined to scratch himself, so on the way home we had to stop near the same traffic lights to buy him some mittens. So Ann went into the baby clothes shop *and left me on my own with the baby on the back seat*. What would I do if he woke up? They were the most anxious five minutes of my life, still more real in memory than the actual birth is.

As Steven has grown to be taller than me and to go to university in the city where I was brought up and to teach me how to use a computer and become a systems analyst, and especially as I married him to Sue last year, I have often reflected on the fact that he was supposed to have been flushed down the toilet. I have also come to realize that Steven's being born then, and Mark three years later, in the event contributed significantly to the healing of relationships with Ann's parents. Ann's father died when Mark was a baby, but at least that meant that he had seen and held his two grandsons, and played with one. If they had been born in accordance with *our* plan, I doubt whether that would have been so; and Ann thus comments that God's family planning turned out to be wise.

Ann's mother lived for another fifteen years, and I realized near the end how much we loved each other. She was a gifted and enthusiastic knitter, and the symbol of her love was making me sweaters, the last of which I wore for her funeral to honor her (this also gave me the excuse not to wear a suit). In those last years it was difficult to believe that we had once so resented each other. I knew that the thing that had melted all the resentment away so that it could now only be imagined and recalled as something on another planet was the fact that we had in common as a fierce and frightful bond the fact

that the person we both most loved had this terrible illness. This, too, does not make the illness seem all right, but I have to acknowledge that is is the kind of fruit that the illness has had, and continues to have.

Over the twenty years that followed those first two attacks, from time to time Ann would have relapses of the illness, but the medics were able to control it. So over that period she was lady vice-president of the London University Christian Union (there was a stained-glass ceiling at that point in those days, if not now), qualified as a doctor, had two children, brought them up, and completed postgraduate training in psychiatry to the point of gaining Membership of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. I have had to become more of a “new man” in recent years, but I was not much of one in the 1970s. Only when it became necessary did I learn to cook. Only from my sons – whom Ann got a grip of – did I learn to use the washing machine. Only this year did I finally find the instructions for the steam iron and try them out. Well, I was afraid of those brown marks that men with irons end up with in comedies. That is my story.

A particular concrete memory still amuses me. One May Ann had another relapse of the illness, at a time when our doctor was on holiday. The locum doctor decided to try a different form of the ACTH, which sent Ann batty. More specifically she became manic-depressive – for instance, trying to do more things than it was possible to do. One effect was that she would wake at dawn (pretty early at that time of year I remember, wearily) with a word from the Lord. She was not usually a word-from-the-Lord Christian, but such religious delusions were understandable enough on the part of a religiously-inclined person. Except that when she went on to read the Scripture Union passage for the day, which happened to come from the Psalms, and to read Derek Kidner’s comments on it, each day her word from the Lord would reappear somewhere there.... I still do not know what to make of that, except to put it in my scrapbook of things that happen because God thinks they are good fun.

With hindsight, I realize that the pattern of the illness was changing as Ann finished her psychiatric training. She then began further training in psychotherapy, and things started to fall apart. For a variety of reasons, or in a variety of ways, the job and the training did not work. We thought it was partly because her supervisor was not a Christian and was concerned that she might bring God into her work. I thought it might be that she was simply not good at it. I suspect now that the illness was beginning to take away the degree of concentration and insight that this very demanding specialty requires. But that did not occur to me for years. How it felt to me at the time was that she simply lost interest in me. She would come home each day and need simply to debrief on how grim the day at work had been. I came to feel that she had left me. I was simply someone to talk to as soon as the boys had finished their meal. Each evening we would sit at the table alone as I received this blow-by-blow account of whatever it had been happening and the worries it entailed. There was never a question about how I was or what was happening to me.

At least that is how I remember it. I feel a bit pathetic about it now. But then, I would also wake up in the night and be unable to get back to sleep and would go downstairs and sit on the settee and cry out to God in the manner of the Psalms, feeling alone.

Nowadays our students know I enthuse about the Psalms and about the freedom in pain and in joy that they give us, and many of them come to share something of that. It was new to me then. Once when I was a curate back in the 1960s we were discussing a change in the form of services. I commented in the Parish Council that I thought this would be good because it would involve less singing of the Psalms. My vicar withered me with a look across the vicarage lounge (he was practiced at that, but I was fairly

impervious) and said “My boy, one day you will need the Psalms.” The moment had come.

For Ann it was the beginning of a period of years that seem to have been unqualified loss. Instead of having occasional relapses she began a gradual continuing process of losing mobility and other capacities. She needed a cane to walk with, then she could not drive, then she needed a wheelchair. She would forget things, so it was no longer safe for her to work at all. Her retirement through ill-health became effective on the day I became a principal. In one sense that seems a cruel co-incidence, though in another it points to the way she then began a ministry. It was a different ministry from the one some people imagined she might undertake, one that might involve counseling or teaching people counseling. It was the inactive but powerful ministry of a person who had once been able to do all that, and now cannot.

Over the years Ann has been ministered to and prayed with by many of the high profile figures in the healing enterprise but it seems that whatever is God’s intention for and through Ann is to be achieved by not healing her of her illness rather than by doing so. The year after she gained her MRCPsych we had a visit from a John Wimber “Signs and Wonders” (Vineyard) team in Derby. I went partly because I wanted to look open-minded. In the course of working through the standard teaching material for such events, the leader, Danny Daniels, told us about his handicapped daughter who had *not* been healed, and about how God used her to minister to people, not merely despite her disability but through it. This was not my image of the “Signs and Wonders” enterprise, and I immediately knew that this was a man with whom I could do dealings. He lived in the real world, in the way that I have to. I wanted to believe that God healed and to pray for people’s healing, but I needed also to be able to handle it when God did not heal – not merely to handle it but to make sense of it and perhaps see the other forms of healing in it.

As I write Ann is spending a short time (I hope) in a rehabilitation center. She can just about feed herself, but she cannot stand up. She loves the birds and the squirrels in our garden and the sound of police cars and aircraft passing and television programs such as *Ready, Steady, Cook*, and she loves people and has an extraordinary capacity to arouse love in them.

An incident sums it up for me. We went to some student friends for dinner. At the end of the meal, Ann was enthusing over the cheesecake, and our host offered to put some in a doggy bag, and did. Then after dinner Ann asked her whether she had any chocolate to go with our coffee. She did not have any, but thought for a moment or two and then set off on foot to buy a (large) block from a petrol station. It was somehow an expression of a deep love and acceptance of Ann as she is in her childlikeness, of the kind that I hope I show something of. And on her part I wonder whether in her lack of inhibition she is behaving the normal human way and letting us behave the normal human way. It is normal to love it when we know something that another person whom we care about really wants, because we can then get a kick out of doing it. But we hesitate to reveal the little things that we really want, so we deprive the other person of the thrill of fulfilling this desire. This sounds horribly twee/pious, but what I sometimes find myself thinking is that it is a privilege to look after someone, to serve someone.

Yes, I do sometimes get annoyed with Ann, particularly if her discomfort or tiredness is expressed as apparent annoyance with me. But most of the time she is capable of smiling with as much happiness in her eyes as I ever remember. Even though she grieves over her loss of independence and her inability to work, she lives life moment by moment, often enjoying the surprises of someone who will not remember what was supposed to happen next.

Seizure

As you look back you sometimes see patterns in things that seemed unrelated at the time. One year we had an unhappy term in St John's. In view of the fact that it seemed to be in some sense my fault as principal for not getting on top of it before it felt like a major crisis, I ended the year convinced that it was time I left, for St John's sake and for mine. By the autumn it was looking as if it was right to stay but I was not feeling that I had recovered from the battering of that preceding year. I imagined the next three terms could only be downhill all the way, because that had usually been the pattern – we spent thirty-odd weeks each year giving out and absorbing, and then God restored us over the summer if we were lucky. I say “had usually been the pattern” because that negative patterning did change, and I believe that Ann's influence on St John's was somehow one of the reasons for this.

I remember one of my colleagues praying with me one day that autumn. I was confessing to the fear that although I now knew that this was still the right place to be, I did not think I had the strength to sustain the year. I was not sure I could hack it. She prayed that the restoring that had been going on would continue abundantly. I remember thinking “fat chance of that,” the way you do when someone prays daft things for you. But there is a verse in James about the prayer of a powerful woman being righteous in its effects, and over the autumn and winter I could feel my strength continuing to build up. Which was as well, because there was a lot to think through and handle in St John's that year.

Then after the first session of our course in Spirituality that term, I sat in chapel for a few minutes, not sure why I was doing so, and a student came over and hugged me, and to my surprise I burst into tears. As I have hinted already, for better or for worse, I am radically insensitive about emotions in public. It was partly because of who it was. This student had a daughter who had cancer, and his experience and mine with Ann give us something in common. Yet those particular tears seemed to be more about the demands on me than about the pain inside me. I think it was then that I expressed it in terms of having more balls to keep in the air than I had juggled before, and the problem was not whether I could actually keep them in the air, but whether I believed that I could keep them in the air.

When it came to the next term, there was a particular week which I knew would be especially busy. It was the first week of the new semester and the beginning of my busiest teaching half-term of the year, with two revised courses to start and a new one to launch. My student group was beginning its period of responsibility for chapel worship. And the Bishops' Inspectors were to be in St John's, to satisfy themselves (we trusted) that they could assure the Bishops that it was a proper place to train ordinands, and to make recommendations about matters we need to take in hand and ways we might develop. To coincide with their visit, we had a meeting of the St John's governing body, the trustees, on the Wednesday, with some very important decisions to make about the future development of St John's.

At 3.08 a.m. on the Monday at the beginning of that week (don't you look at the alarm clock when you wake like that?) I awoke as Ann was having what a neurologist later told me was a tonic-clonic seizure, or rather several of them, in which she first went rigid, then convulsed for some time, then subsided into a daze. In effect these were epileptic fits, though in Ann's case (it was eventually established) they were symptoms of her multiple sclerosis rather than indications that she actually had epilepsy or some other condition that can issue in fits.

As far as I was concerned, at the time they might easily have been the convulsions of someone who was dying. But by 4.30 she was in the University Hospital and by 6.00

was in a bed in its medical admissions ward. She stayed in bed for the whole week, hardly moving a limb (voluntarily), and without it being obvious that she was ever again going to. I spent the week commuting between the hospital, the classroom and the inspectors, rather than just the last two as I expected. On Friday afternoon I realized that on the one hand I was mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausted, but that on the other I was running at 100 miles per hour and didn't know how to stop. Fortunately the departure of the inspectors removed much of the stress (not that they were difficult – rather the contrary – but the exercise is inevitably a stressful one) and I found myself able to unwind as I pottered over the weekend. Of course the fact that my spirit made a point of searching out a flu bug a few days later shows that I didn't unwind enough, but I tried.

Those events and the story of what happened over the subsequent two years form the background to what follows in this book.

2 Ascent

I have long puzzled over a particular question about our relationship with God. The Bible seems to assume that our relationship with God is characterized by love and joy and enthusiasm. At the same time the great spiritual writers talk as if the development of our relationship with God is to be expected to involve being more and more at home with dryness and darkness, with desert and unknowing. Is there any way of reconciling these two? I suppose the question interests me partly because I feel that my own life with God has got both tougher over the years, even over the past week, but also more joyful, even over the past week. And the question more than interests me; it bothers me pastorally, because I see other people whose life seems to get tougher without becoming more joyful. It gets depressed or disillusioned or resentful instead.

To put it in the terms of the church's year, what is the relationship between Lent and Easter? Or to put it more generally, what are we to expect as our lives develop? If you have known the joy of being filled with the Holy Spirit, what happens next? Just more of that? If things become tough, does it mean something is wrong? Does God give us nice feelings when we are young and expect us to live tougher when we are older? Is it the way people sometimes talk about marriage – the lovey-dovey stuff belongs to the beginning and as years go by you expect it to grow into something more solid (code for something more boring)? I acknowledge I am too much of a romantic to accept that lying down.

It is worth asking those questions because we need to be able to recognize what God is doing with us and to seek what God wants for us. Sometimes people find that the going gets tough and they have no way of looking at it, of looking at how God might be involved with us when things are tough. If it does not happen to us, it will happen to people we know. It can become something you just have to live your way through until it is over, but then it may not have produced its fruit. *How* can our life with God be joyful and tough, tough and joyful? The nearest I have to an answer comes in the form of a story. It is a story that will be capable of being interpreted heretically, so have mercy on it at those points. It is a story about the woman of the mountains.

The Woman of the Mountains

There was a town near the foothills of a mountain range. Living there, you could not but be aware of the reality of the mountains, though most of the people in the town ignored the mountains most of the time.

There was a woman of the mountains who would visit the town. Because her home was there, she would bring the smell of the mountains, the freshness, the liveliness, the strength, the awesomeness of them. There was a man who was captivated by that, and the two of them fell in love. That gave him a new kind of acquaintance with the mountains, a new kind of experience of them. It made him more aware of them. He knew that he would never be satisfied until he had climbed them.

One spring day when there were other things to do, she whispered that the time had come, and she took his hand. There was no time to buy mountain boots; he went in the sandals that he always wore in spring and summer. They walked hand-in-hand through the suburbs of the town as daffodils came out and children played and men dug their gardens, and he began to realize that he was saying goodbye. Not that he would never see the town again but that he would never see it the same way again. When he had been to the mountains, it would not be the same town.

On the edge of the town the highway curved away to the left, down the valley towards the coast, but as it began to curve a dirt road continued straight ahead towards the green and earthy and purple slopes and peaks. The sound of children and of traffic began to fade, the sound of birds and the smell of grass began to increase, and the sun warmed his back. Each quarter-hour they walked, he became more filled with a sense of well-being and happiness and a sense of love. They had their arms round each other's waists and he could feel the softness of her flesh just above her hip and could sense her fingers on the greater muscular hardness of his own side. He did not think he had ever been happier, and yet he knew he was only beginning a journey.

After a couple of hours the fields became woods and the dirt road became a path and started to climb. At noon they emerged from the woods to find themselves on a craggy edge from which they could look back over the way they had come. They stopped for a picnic. They talked about the mountains and about the way they had met and about their love and about this journey. And then she said they had to begin walking again. The climb was to become serious.

They were above the tree-line now and the terrain was more rugged. There was still a path, in fact there were a number of them, and actually to his surprise he realized he could see some other figures on these paths – walking a bit desultorily, it must be said. It was not clear where these paths went, and anyway she seemed to ignore them. It was not obvious to him why her route made more sense than the various paths, but he had no alternative but to follow.

And he meant "follow." Before, they had walked hand-in-hand, strolled really. Now she led the way. It was partly a practical thing: the way had become narrower and it was often steep and rocky, and he needed to grab hold of rocks from time to time to help him along. But as well as that, she seemed to have become more decisive and dynamic, to have a more specific idea about where she wanted to take him. The playful happiness of the stroll and the picnic seemed to have quite gone. If he thought about it, the odd thing was that he had no less sense of their being together. But he did not have time to think about it much; he became too busy concentrating on the climb, on the difference between safe rocks and loose rocks, on keeping his footing on a particularly narrow ridge. He was surprised that his sandals coped with it all, but they did.

At three they again stopped for a breather, and again it was a place that gave him chance to look back to the town and back over the way they had come. They had walked for five hours, about four and three-quarters more than he was used to, as a man who normally experienced the countryside insulated by steel and glass and rubber. The climb since lunch had taken things out of him. It was hard now to remember the light-heartedness with which they had walked through the suburbs just a few hours ago. They did not talk in the way they had when they were strolling rather than climbing or in the

way they had over lunch. Yet he had a strange sense that the awareness of being together was at least as strong as they sat in silence. They knew that they were with each other on a crucial journey that was in its way important for her as well as for him. She so much wanted to take him to the top of the mountain where she belonged.

It was also becoming a bit hard to remember the sun on his back. He suddenly realized that this was because a mist was descending. It was cold, and as they sat there he put on his sweater.

Then she hauled him to his feet. She had never done that before: it was again as if the time for words was over for a while. She looked at him with love in her eyes and slapped him on the behind and turned round to begin the walk into the mist. She looked as if she knew exactly where she was going, though he was blown if he could see how. She seemed to become even more decisive and directed than before, almost a different person from the dancing woman of the mountains who had originally won his heart. He did not mind that. It was like the unveiling of something. It did not take away from what he knew of her before, and what he knew of her before and had fallen in love with made it quite possible to trust this new tougher revelation now.

So in a strange way as he struggled to keep up with her in the mist he found that the love he felt in his heart was increasing in its wonder, though he did not have time to think too many romantic thoughts. Some of the time he was just wishing he had brought a thicker sweater.

At one point they had to walk along another narrow ridge, and it felt a bit scary. He had no idea how far he would go if he fell. Then they had to scabble up some steep scree, and again he did not like to think about the consequences of losing his footing. Eventually he had the chance to find out, because he did slip. And like magic she was there, knowing how to make best use of her weight to enable him to regain his balance. He remembered that story about when the two pairs of footsteps become one, and he knew that in reality it was a fantasy. He would never be carried (actually he did not want to be), he would always have to do his own walking, but he would never be alone. And when she smiled at him for a moment as they stood, still a bit precariously, half way across the scree, he saw love in her eyes again, and he realized how much it meant to her that he was making this journey, and he loved her back with a new kind of tenderness and commitment and fierceness that he had never felt in their little house back in the town.

In time the mist half-cleared, though not so as to make it possible to see beyond a hundred meters and therefore to see where they were going or where they had been. They had that experience you have with some mountains, when ahead of you there rises another ridge and it looks to you as if this must be the last one, and you think it had better be the last one because you have climbed enough, thank you, and whose silly idea was this anyway, and why are not you playing in the street or digging the garden? But you climb it, and the reward is – another ridge to face another few hundred meters further on.

At least now, as the slope was more open, she could walk alongside him and make a joke or two at his expense, though she would never say whether the next ridge would be the last, and he began to wonder whether she knew, or whether this journey contained surprises for her too. But he never stopped trusting her and never stopped loving her and thrilling at doing this walk with her and at seeing the look of love in her eyes from time to time.

They came over yet another ridge and just when he had stopped believing it could be the last... it was. An extraordinary vista opened out before them. The mist was quite gone and the sun was shining. They were on top of the world. Once again they could look back on the town they had come from. They could also look on in the opposite direction, and it was an extraordinary scene. They could see the layer of mist below the

peak, but beyond the mountains the mist disappeared and they could gaze as far as the coast. He could see the belt of sand and the sun glinting on the waves.

But his eyes also took in what they saw on the flat top of the mountain. He suddenly realized that he had not asked where they were to eat or sleep, given that it would be near evening before they reached the peak. He realized it only because as he looked across this little flat mountain top he saw a picnic laid out, blankets to sit on and a tablecloth and a basket of bread and a bottle of wine, and a man wrestling with a corkscrew.

The woman of the mountains ran to the man and they hugged and he saw the same twinkle and the same affection in the man's eye as the ones he loved in her eye, and he knew this was also his father. He walked up to him shyly, but with a kind of confidence that made it possible for them to embrace too, because they had her in common, and because they knew that they belonged to each other because of the love they shared from her and for her.

The three of them talked about the climb and about the forest and the scree and the mist and the dangerous moments and the falls and the ridges that never seemed to come to an end, but also about the way it was all possible because he and she were together and because of their love for each other and because he trusted her. They ate bread and drank wine and looked in wonder over the vista. They sat in the warm silence of the evening.

And they talked about the people in the town who did not know her, and the people who did know her but who had never been drawn to climb the mountain. And they talked about the other people they had seen on the mountain. There was no one who had fallen off, no indication of fatal falls. But they had seen people who felt tempted to give up or who were on paths that would lead to the top only by a very long way around, and people who could not understand why it was such a hard climb, and people who had stopped climbing on the sunny lower slopes in order to pick daisies and enjoy the sun, or who had got stuck higher up because they found it all too hard. They were all people who seemed to be walking alone, who thought they were walking alone, who did not see themselves as walking with the woman of the mountains.

And the two with aching limbs but with love in their eyes agreed to come and tell them that they did not walk alone and to invite them to look up and see the love in the eyes of the woman of the mountains who was walking with them and who mediated and promised the presence of the one who laid the picnic feast even when it did not feel as if he was anywhere near – the love in her eyes which was for them, for you.

I Still Haven't Found What I Am Looking For?

Below my notes of that story it says that "following Christ is a hard road but little by little you will see the light in the darkness and drink the water which springs from a dry land – and vice versa." I don't know where that came from; my friends sometimes add things to my files when I leave the computer switched on, and so perhaps do other angels, whether it is switched on or not.

In theory, when you have come to know Christ you have found fulfillment. You have found what you were hungry for. There is a U2 song about climbing the highest mountains "only to be with you"; but "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." When I sang it once in a seminary gig, sounding as if I meant it, some students were a bit bemused. Yet in terms of spirituality, not least, you continue to look forward. St John of the Cross sees us as moving through attraction and engagement to a marriage relationship with Christ, yet still speaks of a final consummation which lies in the future.

3 Calamity

A few months before Ann had her seizure we had been studying Job in class. Mark, the student whose daughter had cancer, had asked me what the story of Job meant to me in the context of Ann's illness, and I fell into talking the class through the story of Job in the light of that. I could do it only through tears, because that is the way I am, and Mark was weeping his own tears, as were one or two others who had their pains or who identified with ours. It was the oddest teaching experience of my career. As usual I was teaching along with a colleague, and one of the constructive differences between us has always been that she liked to plan everything well ahead and I liked to busk. On the way out of the class she simply said, "I wish you would tell me when you are going to do something like that" (of course the problem is that I usually don't know). I can't remember what I said to the class and I have no notes, but I expect that what follows bears some relationship to it.

Testing

Job is the story of a man who had everything, but who had everything taken away in one of those calamities that come upon human beings. When Princess Diana and Dodi Fayad died, I thought of Job. In some ways their story is sadder than his. As the television said, they – or at least she – had everything but happiness, and then lost everything including their lives when they might have been on the verge of finding some happiness together.

The story of Job is told in such a way as to establish Job as a man who indeed had everything, spiritually as well as materially. He is introduced to us as a whole and straight man who worshiped God and kept well away from wrongdoing. He experienced the markers of the blessed life, a big family and a prosperous household. He cared deeply about his children's spiritual state.

If you are blessed by God like that, it raises strange questions and puts strange temptations before you. What is the basis of your relationship with God? Do you keep right with God primarily because of what you get out of it? On the basis of promises in Old and New Testaments, the "prosperity gospel" encourages us to believe that God intends everyone who is committed to God to expect to be prosperous ("seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be yours as well"). Job had proved that the prosperity gospel works. Was he only a believer because of what he got out of it?

And what about God? God was the beneficiary of Job's commitment, worship, and sacrifices. It is rather nice to have someone committed to you, serving you, worshipping you, giving you meals. That raises strange questions about God and puts strange temptations before God. What is the basis of God's relationship with Job? Does God bless Job only for what can be got out of that? Is the arrangement between God and Job a purely collusive contract, you scratch my back and I will scratch yours? Is it a business contract rather than a personal relationship?

One way to discover whether that is so is for one party to fail to keep their side of the contract. People often assume that our relationship with God is like that. If we make a slip in our relationship with God, God is quick to abandon us. Here the question is raised the other way round. What if God abandons Job?

The opening scene in the story of Job comprises a dramatization of that question. Strange things happen in this scene, and one is not sure how much theology to derive from it. I presume that the story of Job is based on something that actually happened, but the opening scene happens in heaven, not on earth, so it must issue either from human imagination or from divine revelation; it is not mere human reporting. It pictures a scene

in heaven where Yahweh sits in court with “the sons of God,” the other heavenly beings who take part in the making of decisions on what is to happen in the world, and in the implementing of those decisions. They gather to give account of their work. One of them is called “the adversary.” The Hebrew word is *satan*, but the word is not someone’s name, like the later name Satan. Like the English word “adversary” it is an ordinary if rare and poetic word for an opponent (an opponent in battle or in court); it comes a number of times in the Psalms in this connection. It is used of a heavenly figure also in Zechariah 3 and 1 Chronicles 21. Both passages hint at the possibility that the Adversary enters into his work with excessive enthusiasm.

In Job, the role the Adversary plays in the scene in heaven is to ask the kind of sharp questions which will safeguard against the possibility we raised about the nature of the relationship between God and Job. In the British parliament the opposition party can be referred to as “Her Majesty’s loyal opposition.” They serve queen and country by asking pressing questions of the ruling party, making sure it does not have too easy a time, and making it harder for it to pursue too extreme policies. In this scene in heaven, the Adversary fulfils a role that is at once negative and positive. It is negative because of the suspiciousness it presupposes and the trouble it brings, but it is positive because of its potential to vindicate both human beings and God.

The whole presentation thus differs from the presentation of Satan in the New Testament. The nearest I have to an understanding of the relationship between these figures is as follows. In the New Testament Satan is also identified with the serpent in Genesis 3. Now Genesis 3 offers no hint that the serpent is a supernatural figure. The information that the New Testament adds is that Satan was at work behind the serpent. In due course in reading Genesis 3 we need to bring that fact in, but if we bring it in too early we obscure what God meant us to learn from Genesis 3 itself with its portrait of suggestions coming to Eve through an earthly creature with the symbolism of a serpent such as wisdom and danger. In the same way the New Testament indicates that the figure of Satan stands behind the figure of the Adversary in Job 1, and in due course we need to bring that in, but if we bring it in too early we obscure what God meant us to learn from Job 1 itself with its portrait of a heavenly creature who serves God precisely by asking suspicious questions and proposing drastic testings. It is God, after all, who invites the Adversary to evaluate Job.

If the scene in heaven places some theological pressure on us, the resultant scene on earth places some more. Who is this God who allows servants to be killed, animals to be slaughtered, and a family to be decimated, and then a man to suffer terrible illness and a wife to break down as she watches it, all to prove a theological point? The theological and moral pressure may seem to be reduced if we declare that the scene in heaven and the scene on earth are equally the product of human imagination; they are part of a parable. They are fiction. Yet in another connection we may lose out by appealing to that possibility. For the fact is that employees do lose their lives in the course of doing their jobs, animals are the victims of human greed and natural disaster, and families do get decimated through terrible accidents. This is not fiction but fact. The question is how does God relate to those events?

Much of me wishes to dissociate God from them, at least as their cause. I want God to notice when such things happen, I want God to grieve, I want God to comfort, I want God to be able to take the pieces of the shattered jigsaw and do something with them. But what kind of God would be their cause?

Job raises the question what kind of God would not be their cause. There is a famous conundrum suggesting that the fact of evil indicates that God cannot be both wholly good and wholly sovereign in the world. Either God is wholly responsible for all that happens but not wholly good (which explains the bad things that happen to good

people). Or God is wholly good but is not in a position to ensure that only good things happen to good people, because of having allowed other beings to have power in the world (human beings and Satan himself).

My impression is that Christians regularly opt for the second of these solutions to the conundrum. The Job story points to the first solution. Whereas modern Christians prefer a God who is very nice but not very efficient, the Job story offers us a God who does some pretty odd things but who is at least clearly in charge. Even though that does raise those questions about God's goodness to which we will come back before the book is through, there is some security in it. I am simultaneously frightened and reassured by the fact that God accepts responsibility for the trouble that comes to us, for the disasters to working people and the suffering of animals and the calamities that come upon families and the pain that comes to individuals and the friction that then causes between couples.

We are told that the story of Job as it unfolds on earth has a prior history in heaven. By definition this particular history is not universalizable. Job is a test case. What happens to him happens because he is not like everyone else, because he is not Mr Average-spirituality. He is Mr Super-spirituality (as the story will go on to make even more clear). We cannot infer from the explanation of his suffering an explanation of ours. Yet what we may be able to infer is that calamities do have explanations, even if we do not know what they are. For there is another feature of the story of Job which delights me every time I think about it, not least because it establishes a similarity between Job and us. It is that Job himself never knows about chapters 1 and 2 of "his" book. So he goes through his pain the same way as we do. And he illustrates how the fact that we do not know what might explain our suffering, what purpose God might have in it, does not constitute the slightest suggestion that this suffering has no explanation. After all, Job could never have dreamt at the explanation of what happened to him.

I cannot imagine the story which makes it okay for God to have made Ann go through what she has been through. But I can imagine that there is such a story. I do not know whether we will ever know what that story is. Job and his wife did not come to know his story, and Job was perhaps rebuked for insisting that he should know. Thinking about this now has made me repent again of the attempt to confront God over the question (which anyway works no more for me than it did for Job).

Prayer

One can imagine a little bit of the pain that lies behind Ms Job's exhortation, the only words she utters in this story. She has been the wife of the man who had everything. If we presuppose no questioning of the realities of a patriarchal society on her part (there is a feminist reading of Job, but she lived too soon to read it), that makes her the *woman* who had everything: a successful husband, a fruitful womb, an impressive household, a happy grown-up family. She too sees everything collapse. Perhaps she loved Job and perhaps the two of them could survive the loss of possessions and even the terrible death of her children, until the pain of seeing him physically afflicted became too much. Then she just wanted to end it all, wanted him to end it all. "Curse God and die." Provoke God to send your own thunderbolt.

I may be forgiven for wondering whether in some respects putting up with the pain of someone near you is trickier than putting up with your own; at least, it raises some trickinesses of its own. When it is yours, well, it is yours, and you get on with it. You have the responsibility. The handling of it lies in your hands. When it is someone else's you are simply helpless, and you may feel guilty, too, for being able to do nothing. As I feel that in relation to Ann's loss, so I can sometimes sense our friends' feeling it in

relation to mine as well as to hers, and I can imagine that they feel a kind of helplessness over it, whereas for me it is something I just have to get on with handling.

Job gets on with handling it. His servants are killed and his animals are slaughtered and his children are dead. With almost indecent apparent deliberateness he grieves and he mourns and he kneels and he praises the name of Yahweh. Physically afflicted from head to toe, he rebukes his wife for expecting that we should receive good from God and not calamity. Who is this man?

Fortunately he doesn't exist. In due course he breaks. He will not curse God, as his wife suggested, but he does curse his life. And he begins to ask those questions to which he will not receive answers, even though there are answers he could have been given, questions that all begin with the word "Why?" They are "Why?" questions about himself (Why was I not stillborn?) that become generalized into "Why" questions about people in pain in general (Why is life given to people in misery?).

People's "Why?" questions are sincere, but one suspects that they are not to be taken too literally. I am not sure how much it would have helped Job to have chapters 1 – 2 told to him at this point. I am not clear that he would have responded "Oh, I see, that's okay then." I have implied that some answers would be nice, and this is because meaninglessness is hard to cope with. It is the fear of meaningfulness that is felt by his friends, to whom we will come shortly. Any inadequate answer to the problem of suffering is preferable to the honest and true answer "We do not know." It reassures us that there is meaning after all.

But Job's problem (and mine) isn't just puzzlement but tiredness. He asks why he was not stillborn not because he wants an answer but because it would mean peace, sleep, rest. When people ask "Why?" we have to ask what is the question behind the question rather than give them an inadequate answer to the question that was not the real question.

I have a strange memory from when I was about 13. It was a few hundred meters' walk from the school building to the sports pavilion and the sportsfield. One afternoon, for some reason I undertook to carry everyone's rugby kit from the main building to the pavilion (I can't remember whether it was fifteen or thirty, one team's or two teams'). We all had our kit in drawstring bags and the bags were thus all put over my head and hung down all round me. The thing I remember is the extraordinary feeling of lightness when I took them all off. It was like walking on the moon (except that no one had yet done that).

The memory sometimes comes back to me as a metaphor. For the last decade I have carried two sets of kit. One is the burden of Ann's illness (it isn't really the burden of Ann, of course). It is partly a burden of responsibility. In our house, it is I who have to see that the decisions get taken and implemented, whether it is what we are to have for dinner or whether we move to the U.S.A. In one sense that is no worse than it is for a single person, though I am having to make decisions for two. (We visited some longstanding friends a while ago, and one of them commented on the fact that I had to think for two people; I hadn't quite noticed, but I could see what he meant, and it was helpful to see it.) It is even more like being a single parent, but with the extra dimension of the ambiguity of the fact that one of the people I am trying to think for is an adult who has an adult's right to be involved in the process.

The other burden is the responsibility of being the Principal of a . I could not ask for a more collaboratively-inclined team of colleagues and I know that in the end it is God's not mine, but the fact that I am paid more than the rest is a symbol of the fact that humanly-speaking there is in the end one person who is responsible for ensuring that the its spiritual life is sound and the courses are good and creative new ideas are generated and the finances break even, and that is me. When I said I was leaving, the child of one of the students asked if it would therefore cease to be called "St John's College," and that expresses the point.

Most of the time I do not feel that these responsibilities are a burden. I love Ann and I love my work. It is when I put the responsibilities down that I realize that they are a heavy weight. In 1996 we had two weeks in the Alps with two friends. Early on we had a late-night conversation that somehow turned into a discussion of whether we looked forward to death, and two of us agreed that it was an attractive prospect because it meant putting burdens down, it meant we could just lie there. Over the two weeks, however, I forgot about St John's, and these two friends shared responsibility for Ann, and I realized it was like putting the rugby bags down. I felt lighter, like moon-walking.

Job's cursing and his longing for rest is but the beginning of chapter after chapter of questioning and challenging that dominate his story. They constitute more than a third of it. They continue to ask questions, but these are often patently rhetorical; they are questions that conceal statements. "Do I have any power to help myself?" "Does not humanity have hard service on earth?" They express longings. "If only my anguish could be weighed." "Oh that God would be willing to let loose his hand and cut me off." They issue challenges, to God as well as to human beings. "Will you never look away from me?" They make requests, if that is not too mild a word. "Tell me what charges you have against me." "Stop frightening me." They make statements, sometimes as outrageous as the questions and the longings and the challenges and the requests. "If I hold my head high, you stalk me like a lion." "God has wronged me."

The straightness of Job's speech recalls that of the psalms that pour out human grief, pain, anger, and abandonment, and Job as a whole has been compared to a huge psalm of lament. It is characteristic of those psalms that they display an extraordinary freedom in what they assume we may legitimately say to God, and Job takes that freedom to its logical extreme. There is apparently no limit to what you can say to God. God can take it.

To judge from the end of the book, God does not merely tolerate it, but rejoices in it. Another feature of this story that delights me every time I read it is the moment when God comments on the fact that Job has spoken the truth about God, as his friends have not. We have listened to chapter after chapter of Job's storming at God and storming about God, assaulting God and attempting any which way to get God to speak, and we have listened to God eventually tearing strips off Job and putting him in his place, and then we overhear this declaration that actually Job has been speaking the truth about God.

There is a scheme for understanding the way we grow as human beings that sees us as moving through orientation, disorientation, and new orientation, not once and for all but on an ongoing basis. Orientation means you know how life works, you know who God is, you know who you are, you know how you and life and God relate. Disorientation is what takes place when that knowledge gets shattered for some reason: your marriage breaks up or you lose a child or you lose your job or you study theology and discover questions you did not know existed. Renewed orientation involves a new understanding that does justice both to your original understanding and to what shattered it. The story of Job takes him through that three-stage process, and the argument between him and his friends is about how you cope with disorientation.

The friends cope with it by denying it, as people often do when they refuse to acknowledge the reality of loss and grief. The friends insist on fitting what has happened to Job within the framework of what they thought they already knew about the way God relates to us and runs the world. In that framework, calamity is intelligible. It respects known parameters. The emphasis of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, repeated until it annoys us almost as much as it annoys Job and God, is that people who live right in relation to God find blessing, while people who do not do this experience trouble. When calamity comes, we thus have to ask whether it constitutes chastisement for our wrongdoing. The nuance brought by the angry young man Elihu is that calamity is designed to bring us to

repentance for wrongdoing, to draw us back to God, to make it possible for us to grow in our relationship with God. It is related to Paul's understanding of his own experience in 2 Corinthians 12, which Eugene Peterson's *The Message* paraphrases as follows: Because of the extravagance of these revelations, and so I wouldn't get a big head, I was given the gift of a handicap to keep me in constant touch with my limitations.... At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me, "My grace is enough."

Another of the delightful features of the story of Job is that his friends are of course not wrong in living by this theology. Indeed Job's own story illustrates it. In the end the person who lives right in relation to God does find blessing, and the person who experiences calamity is brought to repentance and led on in his relationship to God by his experience. That is so by the end; it is involved in Job's finding the new orientation that also does justice to the old.

But the point of the argument between Job and his friends is to demonstrate that that old orientation does not survive being set against Job's current experience. The friends, or at least Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, will not recognize this. Rather than revise their theology (as a student once put it in an essay for me) they rewrite Job's life. In contrast, the reason why God commends Job is that Job insists on facing facts rather than hiding from them. Job curses and argues and confronts and challenges and insists and scorns, all in the cause of a resolute requirement that facts be faced rather than evaded. He has lived right by God; what has happened to him does not fit that, and he would like to know how he is supposed to fit that into his universe.

There is a myth about a Greek hero called Procrustes who was condemned to sleeping in a bed that was not long enough for him, a bed he never fitted. It might be a temptation for us to make the orientation offered by the story of Job as a whole the Procrustean bed into which we make everyone's experience fit, as if the point of the book is to provide the missing piece from the jigsaw with regard to the problem of suffering; we now have the answer. There are a number of ways of understanding calamity when it comes to us: it may be punishment for wrongdoing (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar), or it may be designed to take us on in our relationship with God (Elihu), or it may be designed to vindicate our relationship with God (the opening and closing scenes). The question is which one applies.

But that is to miss the point, a point to which attention is drawn by Job's continuing unawareness of what happened in chapters 1 – 2. It is to refuse disorientation. It is to think that we have the problem solved. It reminds me of the preacher who closed his sermon about the Pharisee and the Publican by thanking God that we are not like the Pharisee. We have missed the point. The story of Job suggests that there may sometimes be explanations for calamity that we do not know, but we have to live with God without knowing them.

Trust

Job is a postmodern book. It does not move in linear fashion from the question to the answer. It walks round the question over 42 chapters, worrying at it, trying out ideas, looking at it from different angles, and then leaving you. In one sense you are no further forward in chapter 42; as I have suggested, it ends up reaffirming the theology that was implicit in its beginning and explicit on the lips of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. The great speech in chapters 38 – 41 with which Yahweh confronts Job must in some sense be the book's climax, but when I have told students how it constitutes that, I have not been sure I was convincing myself.

In this great double speech Yahweh first takes Job on a great tour of creation, as if to say “Are you old enough to have been there when I created all this, or to have had time in your life to look at all of it? And are you big enough to control it?” Another of the delights of the book (though this time a puzzling one) is that in this *pièce de résistance*, there is actually little that has not in principle already been said somewhere in the book by Yahweh or by Job or by one of the friends. In this *tour de force* it is said with huge and relentless power, but that undermines rather than vindicates the submission of Job in 40.1-5. One has the impression that Job surrenders because he is overwhelmed by superior firepower rather than because he is morally or intellectually convinced by an argument. The man who wanted to talk man-to-man with God now wants to get away.

What is the point of God’s three-page series of questions? In his confrontation of God Job has insisted on arguing on equal terms with God. God’s speech is a relentless insistence that Job is too small and the world too big for Job to pretend to be in that position.

Sometimes I find that a long car drive gives me opportunity to talk things out with God. I am not very good at quiet days and the like, but there is no way of hastening the end of a long drive. On a recent car journey I was talking through things with God, and I went on to challenge God about Ann. I said, “You have to have mercy on her.” In response God chillingly echoed back to me my own words, saying “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy”: more chilling in their context in Romans 9:15, I think, than when uttered by Moses in Exodus 33:19. In other words, “What I do with Ann is my business. You can trust me with Ann or not, as you like. It makes little difference to me. It’s between me and her, not me and you. I decline to be held to account by you for Ann.” I was being treated the way Job was treated.

With further irony, once God has Job by the lapels (the reverse of the stance Job had been looking for) God has no intention of letting go easily. Job gives in, hoping to escape, but finds that instead God starts off again; one can almost hear Job’s desperate “Oh no!” God’s second speech is shorter, but it does seem to say something new, and something quite relevant to my challenge about Ann. Job had been issuing a challenge about God’s fairness, God’s justice. It is the classic question about theodicy, about the justice of God. God’s second response is, “Okay, if you are so clever and so committed to things being fair, you set about running the world for a while. Put pride down. Dethrone oppression. Then I will acknowledge you.”

“And I am prepared to be evaluated by my own criteria. I invite you to look at the evidence that I can be trusted to run the world in a way that works things out fairly.” God develops this claim in a different way from the one we see in the first speech. There God painted on a broad canvas, took Job on a lightning tour. Here God is David Attenborough focusing in a whisper on just two creatures. In Hebrew they are behemoth and leviathan. The words could refer to ordinary animals - ordinary in one sense but extraordinary in another. They are then the hippopotamus and the crocodile, the most fearsome creatures you might ever expect to meet in Palestine. But these words come to be used for more mythical creatures like the dragon, creatures symbolizing the power of chaos and disorder that can ever seem to threaten to overwhelm the life of the cosmos and our individual lives. Set Job alongside either of these creatures, and if he is wise he will run a mile. He cannot pretend to control them.

God’s relationship to them is quite different. God is behemoth’s maker, who can approach him with a sword (40.19). God can treat leviathan as a pet (41:5). God had, after all, specifically formed leviathan to frolic in the seas (Psalm 104:26), as much a joke as the Loch Ness Monster. Job knows about God’s relationship with creation and the powers of disorder within it. He is invited to assume that this expresses God’s relationship with forces of disorder in his life, too. That is the only answer he is going to

get to the problem of evil. It is the answer he has already. God has demonstrated the capacity to keep the forces of disorder under control. Job has to assume God is still doing that, even when he cannot see that this is so. He has to trust even when he cannot see.

4 Cheek or Chutzpah

Some while ago I remember being puzzled when I read one or two books about preaching, because they had chapters in them on titles for sermons. A title for a sermon was something I had never felt the need of. Then on a visit to the U.S.A. I think I discovered the answer. It used to be the case in small-town U.S.A., and I believe still is, that you advertise in the local newspaper not only the times of next Sunday's services but the subjects of the sermons. This seemed to me a wondrous expectation, that not only should you have a striking title for the sermon, but that you should have it by the Wednesday before you were due to preach it. Both of these I would normally find difficult.

If this were next Sunday's sermon, at last I would be able to fulfill the requirement, because this chapter is about "Five amazing things that you can tell God not to do." My colleague George Bebawi once preached a sermon about the ten bad habits of God, and these are partly related (God is always late, is unpredictable, does not care what people think, has a love that is blind, prefers the broken to the strong, is self-contradictory, does not remember evil and personally repents of evil, is faithful but has changes of mind, is paradoxical, and behaves like a child).

The five amazing things you can tell God not to do come in a prayer of Moses in Exodus 32. Moses is on the top of the mountain with God, receiving instructions about the way the relationship between God and Israel is to work out, and what is to be the pattern of worship, and how God and Israel are to relate to each other. Israel is at the bottom of the mountain, rather impatient about how long Moses is going to be delaying at its top and deciding that it will exercise some creative initiative, indulge in some creative liturgical innovation, in connection with the question of how God and Israel will relate and how Israel will worship. Ironically, there at the bottom of the mountain Israel is doing exactly the opposite to what God is telling Moses at the top of the mountain.

Don't Lose Your Temper

It leads Moses into having to pray for the people. First, he says, "Don't lose your temper." "Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?"

It seems strange to think of God getting angry. There are at least two important and precious implications in the fact that God does. One is that it means that God is a real person. God is someone with feelings and passions such as compassion and mercy. God is someone who loves and cares, who joys and delights, who gets jealous and gets angry. God is not a kind of abstract entity up there, or an impassive monarch sitting on a throne, untouched by anything. God is not an idea, nor merely the ground of my being. God is a person with passions, and therefore among the passions are anger, wrath, a temper to lose. And that is part of God's being one in whose image we are made.

It is easy for theology to turn God into something you study. God becomes a matter of ideas. You wrestle to try to understand the idea of God being One yet also being Three and the whole business becomes something abstract. But alternatively the process can become a way we understand more about God the person. We can think about God having three ways of being God, all of them ways that relate to us.

Our church in Britain had a community center, and I remember once discussing her job with the then-warden, Mary Rose. She knew that as warden she needed to have her finger on what was going on in the community center as a whole and on its policies. She also needed to hang around the mums' and toddlers' group and the lunch club, so that she was involved and not remote. Of course she could not do both of these at once. If she was involved with particular mums all the time, a crisis could blow up all unawares elsewhere.

God is like and unlike Mary Rose. God needs to have a finger on the world as a whole but also to be involved with nations and communities and churches and individuals. God can do both because God is One, but has three ways of being God, Father, Son, and Spirit. An old way to think of that is to think of the Son and the Spirit as the two arms of God. One arm was extended at the incarnation, once-and-for-all. The other is extended for ever in the world and in the church. The effect of extending two arms, as opposed to none or one, is to make an embrace possible. We are invited by God's two arms to live "in" God: within the embrace of Father, Son, and Spirit. That's what God's being Trinity makes possible.

God is a person, and the Doctrine of the Trinity is designed among other things to safeguard that fact and to show how God can be personal in relation to us. And God gets angry, too, because of being a person.

I suspect that the Israelites talked about God being angry because that was often how it seemed to be, to judge from what happened to them. You know when someone is angry with you: you have got cuffed about the ear, and you know there is probably something behind that. Things go wrong in your life, or in the world, or in the church, and you infer that God must be angry. Then you either try to infer the rational explanation for that, and repent, or you conclude that there is no rational explanation, and you say "Come on, stop it."

If we look at the world and the church as we know it, it would be a reasonable inference that God is angry. Perhaps that is why world and church (in Europe, at least) are in such a mess. We easily accept the fact that the church is so decimated and insignificant and shrug our shoulders, instead of asking whether God is angry. What we should be doing is challenging God about letting the church be the laughing stock of the nation, as it often seems to be. Instead, we simply accept it or shuffle our feet about it, or try to do our best, our really pathetic best, to do something about it. Perhaps what we should be doing is what Moses does, saying to God "Why are you losing your temper?" We might even get an answer.

Don't Give up on Us, Don't Give the Wrong Impression, Don't Be Inflexible

Moses' second challenge to God is, "Don't give up on us." Don't give up on the project that you have begun. "Why should your anger burn against your people, whom you have brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?" You have only started the job. You said you were going to take us into the land you promised us. You said you were going to enter into a relationship with us. You said you were going to provide the world with a model of what it was like to be the people of Yahweh. You are not going to give up on the job, are you? You are not going to give up on us, are you? You can't do that.

Again I suggest that if we look at a world and a church where it can seem as if God has given up on us, then Moses' kind of prayer may be one we should be praying. Why give up on the church? One can think of umpteen reasons for doing so. "But don't give up on the church. The job is only half done, Lord."

And “Don’t give up on me.” I would give up on me. Moses invites us to challenge God about giving up when the task is only half-completed, with regard to the world, the church, or individuals such as ourselves.

Moses’ third challenge is, “Don’t give the wrong impression.” It continues from the second. “Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that Yahweh brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’.” Think of the kind of impression you would be conveying to the world, to the whole of creation. Think of your own reputation. It is one of the standard bases upon which prayers in the Bible appeal to God. We ask God to do things “for God’s glory”; that might seem a somewhat selfish basis of appeal. It is “for your name’s sake,” lest people think badly of you. The people in the Bible are totally unscrupulous in prayer. They will do anything to get God to do the things that are near God’s own heart and God’s own agenda, to get God motivated to act. “You cannot cast us off at this moment and give the impression that you could not do the job after all, that you were not capable of bringing a people into a relationship with yourself and into their promised land, even if you were capable of bringing them out of Egypt.”

And “Don’t be inflexible.” Turn from your fierce anger. Change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. The Old Testament is not at all afraid of the notion of God having a change of mind. Readers of the Bible again shuffle their feet about this, as if God should not have to do a thing like that. Perhaps part of what lies behind it is this. Anyone who is involved in leadership knows that most of the time the kind of decisions that you are taking are not made clearly on the basis of this being one-hundred-per-cent obviously the right action, or even ninety-per-cent obviously the right action. They are often made on a basis of sixty-forty, if you are lucky, or 51-49. And God is in the same position as anyone else with regard to this. God is always having to choose between the least calamitous courses of action.

So it does not take much to push God from 51 to 49. God had decided to do *this*, but was only a percentage point away from doing the other. “Could you not reconsider the basis on which you have made that decision? Could you not just change those figures around? Don’t be the kind of person who, once they have made a decision, won’t reconsider.” Politicians let themselves be caught in a bind in this way, as if changing one’s mind is a weakness. Being prepared to change your mind is a strength (well, admittedly, not if you do it all the time). To be flexible is a strength. And one of the things that is going on in prayer is that we are indeed asking God to do something different from what God was going to do. Indeed, if that is not part of what is going on in prayer, then there is no point in prayer. The point of this kind of prayer is to get God to do something that God otherwise would not do, or not to do something that otherwise God would do. When we are asking God to do things, it is an activity designed to make a difference. We are saying to God “Don’t be inflexible. Change your mind. Do something different from what you intended.”

Ann and I once invited a friend of ours to come on holiday with us, and she declined because she could not really afford it and did not want to come without paying every penny of her way. The next year she could afford it and came, and we also invited another friend. This second friend seemed likely to decline for the same reason, but our first friend urged us to try to persuade her, not to take “No” for an answer. I expostulated “But you wouldn’t come last year!” “You didn’t try to persuade me,” she said. I had given in, taken “No” for an answer. I would not do it again with her, or with God.

Don't Forget Your Word

Fifthly, "Don't forget your word." "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance for ever.'"

God has made some promises and what Moses is doing in prayer is reminding God of these promises. Talk of "claiming" things from God can sound questionable, but there is something to it. You are battering on God's door or upon God's chest and saying "We will not allow you to forget the words you have uttered to us about your intentions. We will not allow you to forget your promises." What we are doing in prayer is reminding God of commitments that God has undertaken, that God cannot get off the hook of.

And Yahweh had a change of mind about the plan to bring disaster on the people. If we want to be philosophical (in a certain sort of way), of course, we can say that God knew ahead of time that the moment would come for a change of mind and that it was all part of a plan. We may prefer to safeguard God's sovereignty in this way. But the Bible does not do so. More often what the Bible does is lay the story out as a story, lay it out in narrative order, lay it out as history. It then portrays God's response to Moses as a real response. We are not told in brackets "Now of course God knew ahead of time that Moses would pray that way, and God had made allowance for that." If this had been so, would God's response really have been a response? In the story the Bible tells, it was a real response. What is going on in prayer is that God is involving us in the process of decision-making whereby things happen in the world. It is not the case that God decided by fiat ahead of time (before Day Six of creation, as it were) what was to happen in each of the umpteen trillion years that was now to unfold. It is the case that God decided to create some people who would indeed be made in God's image, with the characteristics of God, and would then be drawn into the project that God was initiating at the moment of creation. And prayer is one of the ways in which they would be drawn into the fulfillment of that project in the world. That is why, if we do not say things in prayer, things do not happen. Perhaps that is why history has gone on for such a long time. That is why church history has gone on for such a long time. That is why Israel's history went on for such a long time. God never found that anyone suggested the right action at the right moment. God invites us into the fulfillment of that divine purpose in the world. Thus, when people pray, things happen (or get prevented).

Normally the way prayer goes on in the church bears no relation to what the Bible has to say about the subject, like most other things that go on in the church.

Five amazing things you can tell God not to do:

Don't lose your temper
Don't give up with the job half-done
Don't give people the excuse to misjudge you
Don't be inflexible
Don't forget your promises.

Or to express these five daring exhortations as positives:

Be patient with us
Be persistent with us
Be aware of what people think
Be prepared to change your mind
Be mindful of your promises.

5 Community

When people ask me what we will miss when we move to the U.S.A., they often comment on the difficulty of leaving a place where you have lived for 27 years. Neither the geographical place nor the length of time seem particular issues for me, though I am prepared to discover that I am wrong. I do expect to miss working, living, and worshipping in the kind of community to which I have belonged; I would miss it if we had been here for only five years. I will especially miss it because it has been such a supportive context for Ann and me as we have lived with Ann's illness, especially with the particular pressures of the last few years.

From time to time I have heard people say "St John's is not a community." They have said this in anger and in anguish. I think I have heard it less in more recent years, and that is probably in part something to do with Ann, with the part she plays in focusing the community. Indeed, there is a significant contrast between that protest and the contents of this note that a student wrote to me when (all unbeknown to him) we were in the midst of wondering whether it was time to leave St John's.

For the last five or six weeks I have been praying for you. I think this has come from my struggling with questions about what community is. My conclusions are that there is a huge pressure from secular society's values on St John's which causes conflict for the community and therefore conflict for you. I think the Church (as an institution) has become part of these values and therefore unwittingly demands some of these values to be part of St John's – I.e. more authority and stratification etc – and therefore more demands on you. Even my own presuppositions and insecurities want these values - i.e. when I am not close to God in prayer.

I therefore would like to say that I feel we are living as a biblical community, i.e. a type of corporate prophecy. The balance we have to have here is that we do not lose the secular part of ourselves but struggle and transform it by the openness of our community. We students feel we can be honest and not judged. If we can be honest, we can live in truth.

I also realize that with a prophetic community goes rejection, uncertainty, and a desert. Perhaps this is why I feel I need to pray for you.

As I have implied, I do not feel the kind of pressures implied in the last paragraph anywhere near as much now as I once did, and I suspect that Ann is key to that.

Marks of Community

Being able to utter the protest "St John's is not a community" presupposes various things: that we know what a community is, that a seminary ought to be one, and that this is important. The second and third of those I believe; St John's ought to be a community and this is important. The first assumption, that we know what a community is, is trickier. A few years ago a lecturer who used to teach sociology in St John's told us about some research that had been done into what was the essence of community, the nature of community, the real meaning of the word. The answer was that there was nothing you could identify as the real meaning of the word except that it was a "warm" word, it suggested something nice. And of course that was underlying the anguish when I heard people say that St John's was not a community. They were saying they were cold, if you

like. And it also explains the degree to which the word community is used, in a political context (for instance): we talk about the local community and community tax and the European Community and the international community and the community of faiths and even the world community. It is a word with such a wide range of meanings that to say a church or a or an area is a community, or that it is not, must be nonsense until we have said what in this context we mean by the word. Ever since, I have avoided using the word, and felt no deprivation. How can we begin to define it?

Psalm 111 gives us some of the markers of a community. Not surprisingly the first feature of community life that it points to is worship. It is a psalm, so it would be, wouldn't it? Well, no, psalms do begin with other things, so maybe it *is* worth noting. "Hallelu-yah," it starts. "Praise Yahweh." The verb is plural. Praise is something the psalm challenges people to do together. But then immediately it changes to the singular - "I will praise Yahweh with *my* whole heart." Then immediately again that individual worship is set back in the context of the community - "I will praise Yahweh in the company of the upright and among the congregation." So the psalmist believes that the deeply felt worship of the individual is really important; but in the way the sentence works this individual worship is set in the context of the worship of the community.

That might suggest various insights. It might hint that we cannot evaluate the full significance of our individual worship unless we can see how it feeds into corporate worship. Or that the reality of corporate worship depends on the reality of individuals worshipping at the heart of it.

Because this is a psalm it points us to worship as the first feature of the community to which the psalmist belongs. Worship is not the thing anybody spends most of their time doing, even in a convent. But worship is the framework, the heart, and the key to what a seminary, at least, is and does as a community.

The second feature of the life of the psalmist's community that we hear of in Psalm 111 is study. As is the case with worship, that clearly fits the kind of community I have belonged to, but significantly the psalm is implying that it also fits other kinds of community. "The works of Yahweh are great, studied by all who take delight in them" (verse 2). Maybe that has already been hinted in verse 1 when the psalmist speaks of worshipping with the whole heart, because in the Bible the heart is not just the center of the emotions. In fact, if you want to talk mainly about your emotions, you are as likely to speak in terms of your stomach or your kidneys ("Darling, I love you with all my kidneys"). The heart is the center of the whole person as a thinker and not just as someone with feelings. It is the locus of the mind. So the worship that the psalm speaks of is one that occupies the psalmist's whole *mind*, "I will praise the Lord with my whole mind." It is exactly the determination Paul urges on the Corinthians.

In the common life of a seminary the feeding of the mind probably occupies more time than any other single occupation apart from sleep. Sometimes the two coincide, of course. In a fellowship group once, we were each asked to think of a word that best described our life at the moment, and one person wrote "a sponge," and that summed it up rather vividly. Come to the worship of the community, says the psalmist, and squeeze your sponge out to the glory of God, make it material for praise, pour it all out to God, and then go and fill it some more. "I will praise the Lord with my whole mind."

"The works of Yahweh are great, and studied by all who take delight in them." The works are the great acts which God has done in Israel's story. The psalm goes on to recall the way God brought the people out of Egypt, the way God was revealed to them at Sinai, the way they knew God's provision in the wilderness, the way God gave them the land of Canaan. "The works of the Lord are great and studied by all who take delight in them." One reason people come to is that they have become people who take delight in what God has done. The logical consequence, says the psalm, is that you will want to

study them. The Prayer Book version says that these works of God are “sought out” by those who have pleasure in them, and that is the basic meaning of the verb. If you go looking for something you need, this is a word you could use. To study is to ask hard questions about something that matters.

And again it is a plural word. The psalm is talking about a community matter. It presupposes the engagement of *my* whole mind, but it also presupposes that *my* study takes place in community. Over recent centuries higher education has become a rather individual matter. It is a process whereby I write my essays and take my exams so that I get my degree. In Jerusalem I have seen Jewish people studying Torah together.

The psalm presupposes that people were enthusing over the great acts of God that made the people of God what they were. When did they do that? The commentators usually reckon that a psalm like this belongs at a festival such as Passover or Tabernacles when Israel especially remembered the great acts of God, their equivalent to Easter or Christmas. It was of the essence of those festivals that they were occasions when people gathered together and lived together as a community, so maybe that gives me the excuse to include a third feature of the nature of our community, the element of common life. I think it’s great the way the Greenbelt/Spring Harvest phenomenon in Britain has brought the camping festival back into the life of the believing community. There’s something about time spent living with other Christians like that and focusing on the faith together. Common life. Now the nature of our position with many of us being married has meant that there’s much less common life than there once was in seminaries, and some singles reasonably enough resent having a greater degree of common life still imposed on them from which marrieds are excused. Do we have enough of a common life to sustain the notion of community?

But there’s something else about that celebrating of the great acts of God. It was not just a matter of recalling what God had done centuries ago. Those events were celebrated in part on the assumption that they suggested a pattern that could be claimed now. Maybe again there’s a tiny hint of that in that phrase “I will praise the Lord with my whole heart.” It is not the ordinary word for praise, it’s the word you would usually use for thanking God for something God had done for you personally, the word for giving your testimony.

Community involves having your own experience of being rescued from oppression, sustained in the wilderness, committed to the covenant, taken to the edge of the promised land. Not just individual experiences of that, but experiences of it that we share with each other. I read a fascinating article once about liturgy, justice, and tears, about bringing our own suffering and the suffering of others into worship. The psalms are very good at that, of course. The article talked about a service in South Africa where at the time of the offertory people brought up not only bread and wine but a set of chains and a rubber bullet and a passbook. They brought their suffering into worship, into the very service that focuses on the suffering of the crucified God, and that belonged to the essence of their life as a community. It brought them together as a community I have no doubt, because I have seen this happen here, when we have grieved before God over illness and death within St John’s.

We do not normally do so, I think, for two reasons. One is the cost to the sufferer, for to talk about our suffering before God implies to talk about it to ourselves, to come to terms with it. The other is related, it’s theological, we’re not sure the faith can cope with it, whether it really has the answers, whether God really knows about suffering. With our heads we know God does, but in our hurt hearts we are less certain and we are not sure we can risk opening the question. We owe it to each other to enable each other to give voice to the grief and hurt and pain of the people of God and the world, and when we do that we will find we are a community in grief, a community in helpless prayer. And then we will

find that one way or another the God of the signs and wonders of the exodus and of the wilderness and of the promised land will be our God, and we will find we are a community in wonder at what God does in our midst, a community in answered prayer, a community in testimony that occupies the whole heart and mind.

There's one other feature of Israelite community life that I want to draw attention to. It's a community of obedience. They were a people who lived by Yahweh's precepts and knew that those precepts were a reliable guide for life (verse 7). They were a people who lived by the covenant that Yahweh had ordained for ever (verse 9). They knew that the fear of Yahweh, reverence before Yahweh, awe before Yahweh, obedience to Yahweh, was the key to wisdom, the key to understanding (verse 10). A community in obedience. And only insofar as they were a community in obedience would all the other things be true. Their worship would not count for anything otherwise. Their study of God's acts would not count for anything, it would not lead to real wisdom, only to knowledge. Their common life would be imperiled, if there was no obedience.

Obedience in what respect? Jesus once said that the heart of that Torah to which the psalm commits itself was love for God and love for one's neighbor. And when he was asked to explain it a bit more he told a strange story about a man who got mugged and got ignored by the people who were committed to obedience but got neighborly treatment from a source you would least expect. A community of obedience in love. So the question is, what would it be like for us to be a community of obedience in love? Not just singing about the servant king but being servants ourselves?

A community in worship; in study; in life; in suffering and in testimony; in obedience.

Resourcing and Resourced by a Community

One of the bishops' inspectors commented that it was bound to make a big difference to St John's having the principal's wife taken off to hospital like that, and I was a bit surprised or puzzled. Perhaps it was so, but the thing it made me think more about was whether the principal's wife having her illness actually made a difference to St John's all the time. There would be a number of reasons why I would periodically think that I had no reason to be there because I was no good at the job (though that was not incompatible with believing that I could do the job at least as well as anyone else), and one of them was that there were things I could not do because of Ann, ways in which being committed to Ann held me back or occupied my time or grieved my heart. But then I told myself that the other side to that coin is the positive aspect to what Ann brought to St John's.

As well as contributing to my making, it contributes to the making of our students. I have this hunch that long after anything I have ever said about the Old Testament, concerning which I care so passionately, has disappeared from some people's memories, some aspect of the memory of Ann abides with them, and in some way they have been shaped by her, as I have been shaped and as Steven and Mark have been. It is not just a matter of relationships with particular individuals. I have the suspicion that she formed part of the identity of that community, and that the fact of having her as the principal's wife determined something of its nature, and even contributed significantly to its growth in health and maturity as she shrank.

The theological ethicist, Stanley Hauerwas, writes especially about Christian understandings of suffering and medicine and mental retardation. Hauerwas asks what we mean by "pointless suffering" and suggests it means that "we cannot situate this life with its suffering in any ongoing story carried by a community that can make this suffering person's life its own" (*Naming the Silences* [Clark, 1993], p. 2). That draws attention both

to the deepest problem about Ann's illness and to the most positive aspect of its mystery. The deepest problem is that God achieves so much through that illness, perhaps much more than God achieves through my ministry, but that this achievement of God's comes about through a systematic ignoring of what seems best for Ann, through a systematic withdrawing of so much that she has valued, her work, her independence, her mobility, her intellectual ability, so that she is reduced to that person who sits in her chair unable to remember what day it is. And yet the edge is taken off the awfulness of that, insofar as her life is situated and her story carried by this community that makes her life of loss its own and shares its love with her. "Historically speaking," Hauerwas goes on, "Christians have not had a 'solution' to the problem of evil. Rather, they have had a community of care that has made it possible for them to absorb the destructive terror of evil that constantly threatens to destroy all human relations" (p. 53).

The community shared its love with her, and shared its love with me. I recall some years previously puzzling over Romans 5:5 over quite a long period, worrying at it like a dog with a bone. "Hope does not disappoint or shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us." What does that mean? Not "What do the words mean?" But "What reality are they referring to?" I wondered whether there was some charismatic outpouring of God's love that I had not had and might seek from God. And yet perhaps one reason I stopped fretting over the question was the fact that such an outpouring as I might long for sounded rather frothy and triumphalistic. Even if God had indeed overwhelmed me with an awareness of love, I cannot see how I could have fitted it in with how Ann was. I had no doubt of God's love for me and no difficulty about expressing my love for God, but for me experience of God had to be experience of felt mystery, more than experience of felt love.

That changed over those few weeks, when I came to feel overwhelmed by love in a way I never had been before, but in a way that recognized hurt rather than ignoring it. In another book Stanley Hauerwas suggests that no matter how sympathetic people may be when we suffer, "no matter how much they may try to be with and comfort us, we know they do not want to experience our pain"; it is a difficulty heightened and prolonged by chronic illness, which all the more alienates sufferer and family from other people (*Suffering Presence* [Clark, 1988], p. 77). So we deny our pain and pretend, and thereby increase our loneliness (p. 78). The comment provides a clue to the question why Christian communities often hide their pain from each other. "We know," says Hauerwas, that other people "do not want to experience our pain."

We think we know. Because what I find odd about his comment is that it is at the same time deeply illuminating and deeply wrong, sharply contradicted by my experience (by his, too, in practice, I discover from correspondence with him). It was precisely the pain I felt that made many people in St John's reach out to me, and made others grieve the more because they could not think of a way of reaching out to me, short of bringing me refectory food when I had flu, which was a paradoxical form of showing love, I thought.

Some were people who reached out to me because of the love that God had put in their hearts, and that disproves Hauerwas's dictum one way. Others reached out to me with that love that God inspired and used because of a particular reason, because of the pain in their own hearts.

One earlier Thursday we had been praying for people in chapel, and the student whose daughter had cancer went out to ask people to pray, and I found myself not moving out to pray with him, but staying in my place, crying. A well-meaning brother came to pray with me and I had to explain that I did not think I was weeping for myself this time but weeping for Mark. That term I looked in the eyes of people who came to sit with me and saw their hurt, which gave them access to mine, and it was often then that I felt overwhelmed by love, overwhelmed by the love of human beings, whose real fleshly

human love it was, but who were also vehicles of the love of God. And I said one day through my own tears to someone else whose pain I knew and which I could at that very moment see in their eyes as they simultaneously hurt for me – I said that it was not fair that they should be there supporting me when they had that hurt in their own hearts, but even as I said it I knew it was nonsense, dangerous nonsense at that. I was trying to make their own hurt pointless. They were instinctively letting their own pain bear its terrible fruit in their capacity to love me.

And I thought “Well, at least, if God could not create a world from which grief was absent, at least God has created a world in which this grief bears fruit rather than returning to earth having born nothing.” And the fact that the overwhelming of God’s love took place through the tears of people’s grief made it possible to bring together Romans 5 and the fact of pain, in a way that is actually true to Paul, for he himself brings suffering and love together.

But why bring God in? Was this not just human love? And none the worse for that? Why bring God in?

One evening I went to bed straight after eating my dinner because I was miserable and could not think of anything else to do. But unfortunately I was evidently getting a bit better from the flu and was not so tired and could not get to sleep, so I just lay there feeling more and more miserable. I longed to have someone to put their arms round me. I knew I could have got up and gone to see someone and that they would have, but perhaps I had been thinking about whether this was all too exclusively human, about whether God was just an extra level of interpretation I was putting onto human caring (and risking dishonoring it in its humanity). I cried out to God, “I know you care, but your arms cannot be felt as a human being’s can.” And then it was as if there were physical arms around me, and I felt embraced by God personally as I have never felt before. And I could sleep the sleep of the cared for.

I realized that there had been a particular sort of embrace that I had valued and subconsciously sought over previous weeks, not the regular sort of hug when you stand man-to-man, but a kind of hug that involved someone standing over me and seeming bigger than me, so that their embrace shielded me from the world and the future and my anxieties and life’s demands. At the end of the Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33 is the promise that underneath are the everlasting arms, but at the beginning of the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 is the promise that God is a mother hen fluttering over its young, and it is that sense of being covered and protected that I have so valued as people have incarnated the protecting love of God to me. I was reminded, too, of Ruth’s plea to Boaz to “cover her” with the wings of his garments, as it were, and of Bruce Springsteen’s wonderful song “Cover me.”

Oddly, as well as reassuring me that God was real and not just an interpretation of human love, that supernatural experience of God’s embrace gave extra value to the human love. Usually God had been reaching me through other people, and now I had more conviction that it was God who was caring for me, but that usually God chose to do that through other people. Why?

I came to recognize that there were reasons for that which were peculiar to me and which related to what God wanted to do with me. I do not think that in life in general I deny my pain, but I recognized that I had subconsciously felt I had to live with it alone. Perhaps I had assumed that there was a grief in Ann’s illness that was peculiar to me and that I had to live with that alone, in the evening for instance when she has gone to bed and I sit writing 400-page books. And I am not sure that this is wrong (though it may be). But whether it is right or wrong, paradoxically, the experience of that bout of Ann’s illness made me face my loneliness, which I think I had barely owned, by causing people to irrupt into it, and also make me ask whether I was as boring or unlikable a person as I thought.

But there is also a general theological reason for God's choosing to reach out to us through each other, which is that love is sacramental. We are physical people, and the physical embrace we offer each other is a sacrament of the embrace of God. God can feed us spiritually without bread and wine, but bread and wine is the normal way because we are fleshly people. God can embrace us direct and not use other people, but using other people is the normal way because we are fleshly people. And people who hugged me in such a way as to make me feel protected became sacraments of the protectiveness of God.

There were one or two interesting characteristics about the people who became sacraments to me like that. I have mentioned that many of them are people with their own hurt. They were also mostly people who were nearly half my age, which provided a laugh several times as nurses who assumed that they were Ann's daughters were roundly put in their place. I am not sure whether there is any other significance in that, though it reminds me of the way God delights to use the younger rather than the elder child in Genesis, and I wonder whether it models something of the turning upside down of expectations that may be true of the gospel. It also reminded me of something I was trying to convince St John's of during the previous year and had failed, that we had within this community the pastoral resources to care for each other. The community did not believe that, but it acted like it, and I suppose I would rather it disbelieved in theory but believed in practice than the other way round, like the first of the two sons in the parable in Matthew 21.

In the meeting between the Inspectors and the college's governing body to which I referred, we fell into some discussion of the nature of community in a in the 1990s, as was inevitable. One of the Inspectors wondered aloud whether the loss of the old markers of a residential – everybody in chapel morning and evening, everybody eating all their meals together, and so on – would eventually mean the loss of any sense of community. Two governors who were students twenty years ago responded with one voice and enabled me to see something that I had half-seen but not quite articulated to myself. The old markers of a residential college community disappeared a quarter of a century ago. If we had been living on the capital of the past, we would certainly have been bankrupt by then.

The reality of the St John's community that was always recognized by people who came in from outside, whether for an hour or a day or a week or a month, was little to do with whether people were all on parade at particular moments (as is just as well). It was a reality in lots of little groups, networks, twos and threes and fours that I never knew existed till those painful few weeks. And it was a reality in the way those groups were not closed self-indulgent cliques but a crisscrossing network, so that St John's was more like a church than it ever once was. In fact it was modeling (the two governors argued in unison) a realistically viable vision of community for parish life. And as the opposite of closed self-indulgent cliques, these groups were a network open to a man in need, not requiring him to force his way into them (for he lacked the confidence to do that) but on their own initiative opening their arms to him and daring him turn away. The church, says Hauerwas, is a company of people who have learned how to be ill and to ask for help and how to be present to one another in and out of pain (p. 80).

One of the students said to me one day that term, "It isn't going to be the same again, you know," and the words strangely upset me. It was partly because I was at that stage of flu when you get overwhelmed by waves of moroseness and gloom, but it was partly because they were strangely pregnant words, real prophetic words, words whose significance I have kept pondering. Did it mean "It wasn't going to be the same" for Ann physically? Was she ever going to be the same? Well, she got nearer to that than I would have dreamt she would ever be. Did it mean "It wasn't going to be the same" because once you have had that kind of experience you can never relax again? "We may laugh again, but we will never be young again?" Certainly I could not contemplate jaunts with Ann half way round the world any more. And if Ann did get to being as mobile as she

was before, what would be the point? Something like that would happen again one day, or something else quite different, so what was the point of going through it and coping with it and recovering when you are going to have to go through it again in some other form?

Or did the words mean that the way people related to me would never be the same and that I would not be the same? One day I was saying to God that presumably now we get back to normal and I cease belonging to those networks of relationships and I have to stay alone again; things do become the same again. And I half-expected God to say “Don’t be stupid,” because that’s what God is often saying to me, but instead God said “Yes,” which I was a bit taken aback by, though God did then nuance the toughness of the “Yes” by promising me that there would be people who would reach out to me and that I had to receive them for what they are and who they are and live with the insecurity of that.

It turns out that thirty or forty days in the wilderness and being ministered to by angels are often not sequential experiences but simultaneous ones. In the wilderness itself God ministers to you through people in miraculous ways. Stone is turned into bread by the word that comes from the mouth of God. But by definition that is then an experience that you have to let God stay in charge of. It is not even covenanted. You have to accept the angelic ministry as it comes in the form in which it comes, and live from day to day, from loaf to loaf, from hand reaching out to hand reaching out, and live through the times when there are no angels or loaves or hands. If being overwhelmed by love is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, then it is presumably bound to be a temporary rather than a permanent experience in this age, because that is the nature of the Holy Spirit’s work: to give us foretastes of what heaven is like, but foretastes, which in this age remain incomplete and are designed to provide guarantees and to provoke yearning. On the other hand you do also have to be wary of failing to recognize angels and loaves and hands, insisting that all you see is stones when God is doing those miracles of provision for you. At least, I have to be wary of that. For it is true that “hope does not disappoint or shame us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

6 Cross

Delivered in the Fire

Over the centuries there have been countless Jews and Christians who have been killed just because they were Jews or Christians, and burning them has been a favorite way of killing them. Four hundred years ago, one of the famous Christians who was deliberately burned to death was someone who came from near the where I have been teaching in Nottingham, Thomas Cranmer, the man behind the Prayer Book. Fifty years ago six million people in Europe were killed simply because they were Jewish, mostly killed by being burnt to death.

In Daniel 3, the Bible tells a story about three Jews called Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah who were willing to be burned to death rather than give up their commitment to God. Their names mean “God has been gracious,” “Who is like God?” and “God has helped.” The story will test the faith expressed in the names.

The emperor of the day erected a huge statue and called a great state gathering when everyone was expected to kneel down before the statue. The three Jews knew they could never do that. When they did not, it was obvious that they were not loyal to the emperor, were not loyal to the state, and did not respect the god that the emperor worshiped. The statue held religion and state together. By means of it, the emperor could use religion to prop state up. So the three Jews were a threat to all three.

The emperor talks as if he is a threat to *them* (well, we all use bluster that way, do we not?). “Can any god rescue from *my* power?” he asks. But Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah know a God who makes Nebuchadnezzar’s gold-plated statue look tawdry. “If our God, whom we honor, exists, he is able to rescue us from the red-hot blazing furnace, and he will rescue us from your power,” they reply. The way they go on is even more striking. “Even if he should not, we are not going to honor your gods or bow down to the gold statue that you have set up.”

We do not know how they were convinced that God would rescue them, but they were right. God did. They were not delivered *from* the fire, but they were delivered *in* the fire. They take the risk and they lift up the cross and they come out the other side. The one who camps around the people of God to protect them enters the fire itself to neutralize its capacity to harm them. The emperor sees that this is what comes about, sees God’s representative with them in the furnace, sees that the fire cannot touch them. So the further great state gathering that was designed to witness to the triumph of the emperor, of his statue, and of his religion, does the opposite.

So God did rescue them. But that does not very often happen to people in real life. They usually get burnt to death. So it is at least as important that before they knew in experience whether they would be right and God would rescue them, they added that even if God did not, they would still keep their commitment to God. Because the implicit question they have been asked is, “Do you only honor God when things work out okay, when God makes things go well, when it pays? And will you believe that God is greater than the state and its religion and its representative, and live in the light of that, even if it means walking into the furnace? Will you still be saying ‘God has been gracious,’ ‘Who is like God?’ and ‘God has helped’? Or not?”

Following Jesus

“People who want to follow me have to say ‘No’ to themselves, pick up their cross daily, and walk behind me” (Luke 9.23).

Jesus is about to commit himself to the journey to Jerusalem that will lead to his dying there. That is the sense in which he is himself picking up his cross. Literally he will only have to pick it up and carry it for a few hundred yards from his courtroom to his execution. But metaphorically he is picking it up right now, because he has a hunch that the course he is committing himself to is bound to end there. Why?

In his book *Engaging the Powers* (Fortress, 1992; pp.109-110), Walter Wink summarizes the answer as follows.

Jesus did not represent an armed threat to the existing order. He broke no civil or criminal laws. He violated religious laws and customs regarding the Sabbath, handwashing, and holiness, but in every case the issue hung on interpretation, and no doubt some rabbis would have supported him; at least they would not have condemned him to death. He mainly taught, healed, and exorcised. Why then was he such a threat that he had to be killed?... The Powers that executed Jesus did so under a necessity dictated by the Domination System itself.

It was essential that Jesus be killed without the real reasons becoming known, because such knowledge would unmask the true nature of the Domination System.... The “Domination System” refers to what the New Testament calls the principalities and powers. These are visible and invisible, earthly and heavenly, spiritual and institutional, personal and impersonal forces which both sustain and subvert human life; they were created good, but have been hijacked by evil, or

have hitched themselves up to evil. They form an outer, physical structure and an inner, invisible reality or spirituality or collective personality. In practice this entire network of powers has come to be integrated round idolatrous values.

The Powers... had to kill him, for Jesus represented the most intolerable threat ever placed against the spirituality, values, and arrangements of the Domination System.... Not only did he and his followers repudiate the androcratic values of power and wealth, but the institutions and systems that authorized and supported these values: the family, the Law, the sacrificial system, the Temple, kosher food regulations, the distinction between clean and unclean, patriarchy, role expectations for women and children, the class system, the use of violence, racial and ethnic divisions, the distinction between insider and outsider - indeed every conceivable prop of domination, division, and supremacy. The gospel... is a context-specific remedy for the evils of the Domination System.

Jesus is provocative in relation to the ideology, the lifestyle, of the day, and he knows it. He has a hunch that this will lead to crucifixion, and he is prepared to pick up his cross. And people who follow him have to do the same.

Now not everyone had to follow Jesus. It was quite okay to believe in Jesus without following him. Most people did not abandon their jobs and their families and their homes in Galilee and follow him to Jerusalem. It is of course the same now. You can be an entirely satisfactory Christian without giving up your job and your family and your home in order to learn how to be a disciple. But people who do leave job and family and home in order to learn how to be a disciple do have to hear Jesus saying "If you want to follow me, you have to deny yourself, say "No" to your own instincts, and pick up your cross and follow me." You are coming with me and you are bound to find that your experience is the same as mine. You too are going to be a walking exposure and condemnation of the world, an exposure and condemnation it will not appreciate. "The greatness of Christianity," Ignatius of Antioch said, "lies in its being hated by the world, not in its being convincing to it." And insofar as we take "following Jesus" as a metaphor for every Christian's calling, then what Jesus says applies to all of us.

How are we to be a walking exposure and condemnation of the world, and a signpost to a better way? The sense in which Jesus was that still applies. The spirituality and values of the establishment, the system, still focus on the family, the law, worship, patriarchy, role expectations for women and children, the use of violence, and so on. But I want to come at it from another angle. There is an analysis of the ideology, the values of our culture which my colleague Roger Bowen took from a lecture by Dr Elaine Storkey, and I have now taken it from hearing a lecture by him (the technical term for that in hermeneutics is intertextuality, though if people do it in their academic work it is called plagiarism and you fail; but I have acknowledged my sources, so that is all right). Elaine Storkey draws attention to four of the particular characteristics of our culture, which she calls individualism, economism, pornography, and relativism. I want to broaden them out and talk about our attitude to community, to currency, to sex, and to truth. But then one of the key points Elaine Storkey makes is that while these are features of our culture, they are also features of the life of the church. The church is not distinctive in relation to its culture; it mirrors its culture.

One can see that with regard to the distinctiveness of Jesus. Those features of his attitudes which confronted the establishment, the system, were one-by-one abandoned by the church. It came to affirm institutional power, the place of clergy, the importance of the family, the centrality of cultic worship, the development of law, the attitudes of patriarchy, the subordination of women, the use of violence, and so on. The church comes to mirror the world rather than model an alternative.

If that is true about the development of the church in the early centuries, it will not be surprising if it also applies to us, as members of our culture and of our church. So what I want to do is to look at our attitude to community, to currency, to sex, and to truth. I do that in the conviction that we are called to be different in our attitudes, that this is involved in the following of Jesus if we are committed to such following, and that it involves saying “No” to yourself.

My bother in doing this is that I end up indulging in the preacher’s besetting sin of trivializing Jesus, trivializing the notion of saying “No” to self and taking up the cross. In due course Jesus had to do that quite literally, and some of his followers had to do it fairly literally (that is, they were martyred, even if by other methods than crucifixion). Our cross-taking is trivial by comparison. My excuse for applying Jesus’ words to us is Luke’s word “daily.” The other gospels do not have that. I presume that is Luke’s way of showing how Jesus is relevant not just on a once-for-all but on an ongoing basis, not just in connection with the really big moments when the Son of Man sets his face to his once-for-all final journey to Jerusalem but also in connection with the trivial little face-setting that we do each day, or each year. What might be the little points at which we could daily say “No” to our culture and its ideology in a way that questions its very foundations and imperils ourselves as we imperil it?

First, there is individualism. Before the Enlightenment, Elaine Storkey or Roger Bowen say, people gained their identity from their community. “I belong, therefore I am.” Afterwards, they got it from individual self-awareness. “I think, therefore I am.” I do not want to give in the temptation to slag off individualism again, because we are always doing that in a rather pointless way. It would be more constructive to look at some examples.

In education, the way it works is that the degree system has always focused on people studying on their own. Gradually it is becoming possible for people to undertake collaborative projects, but in general, education can be a very competitive affair. It is a competition to get the best marks, or to get your views expressed in a seminar. It is said that (for better or worse) women are less inclined to that competitiveness than men, which would fit with patriarchy being an aspect of the Domination System. So saying “No” would mean commitment to a community of learning that denied this aspect of the individualism of our culture.

Paradoxically, church can also be individualistic. We are individualistic in our approach to spirituality: it is mostly about my personal development. The Myers-Briggs personality inventory or the Enneagram can push us along the same road: the question is, what is appropriate for me as an individual. There is a contrast with the notion of “*Common Prayer*.” Cranmer’s vision was that all the people should join in the church’s worship and that this common prayer would be the heart of their religious life. It was always unrealistic, but it was an important vision. I heard an interesting address on spirituality by Gordon Mursell in which he commented that “the essence of the question ‘How do I learn to pray?’ is ‘Be at church at 9.30 on Sunday.’” You begin with worship, in the company of other people, not by going off on a retreat. He then made a significant link with secular life that illustrates how our attitudes as Christians are the attitudes of the age. Our society is one where we seem to value the private vastly more than the public. “What we hold in common, whether it is railways or public parks or prayer, tends to be undervalued.” I guess one problem is that we fear our individual personality may get squashed by a community. We are invited to bet on the possibility of being individuals for the sake of the community rather than independently of it.

Second, there are attitudes to currency. Elaine Storkey calls it economism. Everything has its cash value. Everything is looked at in cash terms. What you earn is the

criterion of what you are worth. Growth is the measure of achievement. Church growth is the ecclesiastical version.

Again, in education the word “credits” points to what has currency, has value, has credit. In the world in general people do not want to do courses of study unless they get some “credit.” Modularization involves giving everything a “credit value.” What has currency is the piece of paper that declares the credits. And if the credits are not what people wish, what they do is complain. The complaint may be just a moan over a pint, but it is more and more likely to be an official complaint and an attempt to get the mark changed.

And the mark may have been wrong and the complaint therefore justified, but it leaves me feeling uneasy. Another of my colleagues commented a while ago that when he came back to Britain after some years abroad, he was struck by what a crowd of grumpy moaners we were. I only half-believed him until I happened to catch an edition of the program “Did You See?” discussing the sitcom “One Foot in the Grave.” Someone from the U.S.A. on the panel repeated that allegation. We are a nation of grumpy moaners. And “One Foot in the Grave,” a program whose hero is a cantankerous grump, had become the most watched sitcom on television.

We are a nation of grumpy moaners, and we belong to a church of grumpy moaners. It is something ministers are the victims of. They utilize huge amounts of energy in absorbing the aggression and resentment of people, Christians as much as non-Christians, and therefore have to learn to pass it on to Jesus as the one who has absorbed the whole world’s human aggression and resentment. One reason why so many ministers look so hunted and gloomy is the extent to which they have been the victims of their people, who reflect the world rather than being distinctive in relation to it, and have not learned to pass it on to Jesus. So saying “No” means changing our attitude to currency, to what counts, and giving up moaning. It means absorbing the church’s and the world’s moaning instead of adding to it.

Third, there are attitudes to pornography, to sex. Now a bishop once observed that it was not his business to go prying into what happened in his clergy’s bedrooms. But we do know that sex is a major problem in our culture. And we also know that sex is therefore a major problem in the church. Whatever are the problems in the world are also problems in the church. It is almost inevitable that this should be so, given the nature of this wonderful energetic explosive human instinct and capacity, in a context when the constraints on it that protected and bound other cultures have all but disappeared. We are caught between legalism and libertarianism.

Fourth, there are attitudes to truth. In the world, relativism rules, and it is now the normal view that there is no absolute truth. What is true for you may not be true for me. What is right for me may not be right for you. That is part of living in the postmodern world.

“Relativism accepts faith, but not truth,” Elaine Storkey or Roger Bowen say. After all, we talk about people coming to faith, do we not? The notion that there is such a thing as actual truth, grounded in the being of an actual God, is an out-of-date one. A little while ago I heard a Professor of Theology declare that the really important thing about a university was that everyone was free to have their own opinions. He reminded me of people who suggest that tolerance is a great Christian virtue. Of course people should be free to have their opinions, but that is not the ideal that universities were invented for. Their name indicated a conviction that there is one universe to be studied and that there is one truth about it. Nowadays even in the church it is often assumed that truth for Islam may be a different matter from truth for Christianity. Indeed, Islam rather than Christianity has become the guardian of the notion that there is such a thing as truth. Now

we know we are not relativists when I put it that way, but we do also fall into “what is true for you may not be true for me” thinking.

Over recent years there have been a number of horrific crimes and events in society which from time to time have looked likely to set going a national debate about national values. The events and the inchoate, stuttering debate are set in the context of a the world apparently collapsing. The authority of church, monarchy, police, the judiciary, the universities, morality, religion, and the family, none are taken for granted. We have dethroned the powers and found that this only generates anarchy.

In the 1880s Matthew Arnold wrote a poem called “Dover Beach” about the sea, the “sea of faith,” which was once “at the full,” when the tide was in. But now, said Arnold, I only hear “its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, retreating.” The tide has gone out for faith. But things cannot stop there. Early in the twentieth century, W. B. Yeats wrote a poem called “The Second Coming”:

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
mere anarchy is loosed upon the world....
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
But what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

In other words, the second coming is imminent, but it looks like the second coming of the Beast. That is what is slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. In the 1960s, Joan Didion took that phrase, “Slouching towards Bethlehem,” as the title for a book about her U.S.A. In the twenty-first century, it may seem that the tide of morality has gone out as far as the tide of faith has.

If there is hope, then one facet of it is that our culture may be beginning to recognize that. It may even be ready to recognize something that confronts rather than merely mirrors itself. Whether that is so or not, Luke calls us to follow Jesus in modeling an alternative ideology, to embody another attitude to community, to currency, to sex, to truth.

In his commentary on Luke, Earle Ellis paraphrases what Jesus says in these terms. If people want to follow Jesus they have to abandon their allegiance to their natural life, ambitions, and interests, regarding them as irrelevant. They then come after Jesus, the way a slave does. In his commentary, Clayton adds, “Jesus did not consider it too high a price to pay for bringing zest, vitality, and spontaneity back into style. Jesus was indeed the great master of the calculated risk.”

“People who want to follow me must say no to themselves and pick up their cross daily and walk behind me.”

7 Darkness

“Yahweh is my light and my salvation”: so Psalm 27 begins. So without Yahweh, apparently I lack light and salvation. What I experience is darkness and loss, gloom and calamity, night and disaster, autumn bringing winter and decline bringing death.

Winter

Someone was talking to me a year or two ago about the way gloom descended upon her as winter drew on, and about a suspicion that this mirrored the literal gloom of winter. Perhaps the darkness of winter makes it harder for us to escape the inner gloom of our own hearts. It reminds me now of something which happened when I was talking to a

counselor I used to go to. I cried when I was in the midst of articulating something that was actually positive and hopeful. That had happened once or twice, my crying at an illogical moment, and I was quite angry about it, and I wanted to know why it happened. The counselor was the type who would usually say nothing but turn the question back on me (which usually worked), but this time he responded. He suggested that articulating hope, and facing darkness and gloom and pain, were close to each other, because the hopeful statement was a denial of something gloomy that I was inclined to feel. The place of the joy and the place of the pain are next door to each other. There inside me are dark corners where the gospel has not yet had its way, places where I do not really believe there is gospel. Places where all is gloom and winter.

That in turn reminds me of a Friday in November when as a we sought to wait on God together, and people talked of the dying autumns of their own lives which mirrored the autumn of nature. And it was only November! How will we face January and February, I asked myself. Sometimes we have negatively tough times in St John's in January and February, as happens in churches, and one reason is that we cannot face the January and February, the gloom and despondency and darkness, in our own spirits. We repress them and they come out in ways that evade the pain but lose the potential for growth that they contain. It is with regard to these, among other things, that Psalm 27 invites me to say, Yahweh is my light and my salvation.

In that sharing in November I remember feeling downcast at the fact that for me the stripping of leaves seemed to be a perpetual experience, as if autumn never ends and spring never comes, but someone pointed out to me that in effect that is where the illustration breaks down, because stripping in itself turns out to be fruitbearing. Later I came across this quotation from John Donne, from a sermon on Christmas Day 1624.

God hath made no decree to distinguish the seasons of his mercies; in paradise, the fruits were ripe the first minute, and in heaven it is always autumn, his mercies are ever in their maturity. We ask ... our daily bread, and God never says you should have come yesterday, he never says, you must again tomorrow, but \!today if you will hear his voice, today he will hear you. If some king of the earth have so large an extent of dominion, in north and south, as that he hath winter and summer together in his dominions, much more hath God mercy and judgement together: he brought light out of darkness, not out of a lesser light; he can bring thy summer out of winter, though thou have no spring; though in the ways of fortune, or understanding, or conscience, thou have been benighted till now, wintered and frozen, clouded and eclipsed, damped and benumbed, smothered and stupefied till now, now God comes to thee, not as the dawning of the day, not as in the bud of the spring, but as the sun at noon to illustrate all shadows, as the sheaves in harvest, to fill all penuries. All occasions invite his mercies, and all times are his seasons.

(From *The Lord of the Journey* (ed. Roger Pooley and Philip Seddon; Collins, 1986) p. 67; reprinted from *The Sermons of John Donne* (University of California Press, 1953-62) 6:172.)

Donne did not know that in Israel itself you can move from snowy winter to desert sun within an hour. That in turn reminds me of the English carol *When the Green Blade Riseth*:

When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Thy touch can bring them back to life again.

Yahweh is my light and my salvation. So whom shall I fear? the Psalm goes on. "Of whom shall I be afraid?"

In one sense I do not do fear. I do not get afraid. It's not a virtue or anything; I just have that bit missing, like embarrassment. Once on the St John's Israel trip we were driving a minibus through a village near Hebron and people started throwing pieces of rock at the vehicle. There seemed a chance that something very nasty would happen, and I was in the navigator's seat. I was in the front line for getting hurt if it did, I suppose, and I remember thinking, "This is interesting; it will be good when we are out of here," and then I remember realizing afterwards that I had not exactly felt afraid, as some people had (there was one of my colleagues who will probably never forgive me for the piece of mis-navigation).

On the other hand I do get anxious, which is different, but related. I can worry, I can wish there was somewhere to hide, or that there was someone to hide me, to protect me.

And the Psalm dares me to say, "Yahweh is the stronghold of my life" or "the refuge of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" There are women's refuges where the one thing you can be sure of is that there will be no men there, nobody to be the life-threatener that your husband or your lover or your pimp could otherwise be. A place where you can begin to learn to relax and regain the strength to face life.

One Thing

Which takes us into seeking, for that is where it takes the Psalmist in offering us this testimony. "One thing have I asked of Yahweh, that will I seek after." One of my colleagues once described someone else as a "focused" person." It made me think about that idea of being a person who was focused. I take it that it means something like this. You can be a person who does all sorts of things, but they are all a bit like grapeshot, there is no unity to them, no one aim that holds them together. You do not concentrate on certain things because they matter, you are all over the place, you are easily distracted from one thing to another. That is key to the idea, I think. But lying behind it is the idea that there is no center to what you are and do. There is no "one thing." (Admittedly one of my women colleagues commented that focusing on one thing was a men's luxury.)

I find it interesting that Psalm 27 comes to talk about this in the context of talking about darkness. It reminded me of St John of the Cross, the person from whom we get the phrase "the dark night of the soul." John was an interesting person, a Spanish theologian and mystic in the sixteenth century. I had always thought of him as rather remote from us until I discovered that he had a job rather like mine. He was principal of a community, trying to get a grip of the students and keep the church authorities happy and write the odd book and keep the adventurous women theologians as content as he could.

One piece of bad news I discovered is that there are two dark nights of the soul, one that is self-imposed and one that is God-imposed. One involves our committing ourselves to a life of denial in order to find the real light in God. Except that John talks about it as finding the real darkness in God. Because paradoxically, the light of God is so bright that when it really shines on us it blinds us, it puts us into darkness.

When John talks about the dark night, he talks about it in terms of a stripping away of the things that do not really matter to us. It takes us back to basics. It raises the question who we really are and what we are really aiming at. You could argue that the question whether you prefer grapeshot or targeting is a Myers-Briggs sort of question, it is a personality question. You can hit things with grapeshot, but it is usually reckoned to be wasteful, it does not achieve as much as targeting, as focusing. So John of the Cross sees it as a virtue that darkness, stripping, takes us back to basics, makes us concentrate on

what deserves concentration. "There is one thing I do: I am going for a target," says Paul. "There is one thing you lack," says Jesus to a young man with a lot of possessions. "There is only one thing that is needed," he says to a woman worrying about the dinner. "There is one thing I know: I can see now," says the man born blind. "There is one thing I have asked of Yahweh," says the Psalm. One thing.

If we are in the dark at the moment, or if we find ourselves walking in the dark in due course, John says, we need to let it strip us, let it focus us, let it make us handle the question what really matters, what we really want. Have we got a target? Are we over-preoccupied by things we have got or things you have to do? Do we know the one thing that is of key importance about who and what we are about? Are we focused?

The Psalm's focus bears consideration. "One thing I have asked from Yahweh, that is the thing I am seeking, the thing I am insisting on. It is to dwell in Yahweh's house all the days of my life, to see Yahweh's beauty, and to inquire in Yahweh's palace." Yahweh's house, Yahweh's beauty, Yahweh's palace, sound a fair focus.

It is just the thing that John of the Cross wants us to focus on. When he pictures us deliberately imposing darkness on ourselves he talks about us needing to be inclined "not to the easiest but to the most difficult, not to the most delightful but to the harshest, not to the most gratifying but to the less pleasant, not to what means rest but to hard work, not to the consoling but to the unconsoling." He advises us that "to come to the pleasure you have not, you must go by a way you enjoy not; to come to the knowledge you have not, you must go by a way in which you know not; to come to the possession you have not, you must go by a way in which you possess not; to come to be what you are not, you must go by a way in which you are not...." It is terribly negative, but it is to give us a focus, to strip us down, but to strip us down to what matters. "One thing."

We are free not to volunteer for that self-imposed darkness. In contrast, if the other darkness comes to us, it imposes itself. It is a common feature of training for ministry. People give up the focus they had before and they are on the way to another focus, but while they are training they are in between. They may take to it like a duck to water, but they may hate it, and they may then lash out at the church and the universities and – if they dare – at God. When they do that (lash out at God) then they are getting somewhere. They and God are doing serious business because they are in the dark and God put them there, and the question is what is God going to do about it. And the answer is usually "Nothing for a while," because quick salvation would short-circuit the process, it would rid them of the chance to discover who they are in this uncomfortable place with yesterday's focus taken away.

They are still free in relation to this darkness. They do not have to co-operate. God does not abandon them because they resist it. It will come to an end, and beginning some new ministry will give them a new focus, give them relief and a form of light, an escape from a darkness. But it will be a cheap escape, and the new focus will not be the Psalm's focus. "One thing have I asked from Yahweh. That will I seek after." To serve God? To be ordained? "One thing have I asked from Yahweh, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of Yahweh all the days of my life, to see the beauty of Yahweh and to inquire in Yahweh's temple." That's the "one thing" that's worth going for.

There are three facts about God there. Yahweh has a house, Yahweh has beauty, and Yahweh has a palace.

Yahweh has a house because Yahweh is a person. Yahweh did not really want a house because of a preference for camping, which is the aspect of the doctrine of God which I have always found most difficult to understand, but whether it was a tent or a house it meant that Yahweh was a person like you or me and you could go up to this house and walk in and see Yahweh. Yahweh has a house.

Yahweh has beauty. I have puzzled about that because it does not obviously fit with the rest of Psalm 27. This is not a soppy Psalm. It is not full of the equivalent to “Jesus how lovely you are.” It is a gritty, robust, determined Psalm, one presupposing that Yahweh is a gritty, robust, determined kind of God. But it believes in the grace and the goodness and the attractiveness of Yahweh, and those features are expressed in Yahweh’s being a gritty, robust, determined kind of God.

Which fits with Yahweh having a palace. Hebrew does not have a word for “temple,” but uses the word for “palace,” so when the word “temple” occurs in the Bible, it is usually a word that reminds us that Yahweh is like a monarch with all the power and privilege of monarchy in the ancient world. Yahweh lives in a palace; but the door is open and we can walk in and talk to the sovereign.

“I have a personal, powerful God with all the attractiveness of that,” says the psalm. “The one thing that I have asked, the one thing that I am seeking, is to live with that person, to ask that sovereign for things, to thrill at that robust and gritty God who is committed to me, who takes a ‘one thing’ attitude to me as if I was the only person in the world, because this God is magic and can do that with me and with each of my brothers and sisters.”

And so I will walk through the darkness because there is light on the other side. “Yahweh will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble, conceal me in the shadow of his tent, set me high upon a rock. Now he will lift up my head above my enemies round about me, and I will offer sacrifices in his tent with shouts of joy. I will sing and make melody to Yahweh” (Ps 27.5-6). The Church of England’s Psalter has “sanctuary” instead of “tent,” but it is paraphrasing. The psalm knows that Yahweh is still an incurable back-packer, even after the temple is built.

I will be there in God’s dwelling, in God’s company, eating and drinking and laughing with God. My ambition will be realized. There is that one thing I want, one thing I have focused on, and I am focusing on it the more because of the pressure of darkness. That is the nature of the experience if you let it have its way. But it will produce the goods. The stripping down to one thing means focusing on that one thing and reaching it, because the one who drives into darkness really is light and salvation.

When you are walking through the dark night, it is no use to you for someone else to tell you that it will come to an end. You have to say it to yourself, you have to be able to give assent to it for yourself. That is partly why John of the Cross wrote his book. He wants you to read his account of how people come through the dark night and at least to know that you are not the first person to walk that way. That is what Psalm 27 wants. It does not mean that this stops being real darkness. It means you may be able to believe that darkness is not all there is, able to imagine finding that “Yahweh is my light and my salvation.”

8 Friendship

On the last day of the St John’s year in June we distribute the “Ember List,” a leaflet containing the leavers’ photographs and details of where they are going, so that people can pray for them. It includes some bio-data that people write themselves, and one of the things they often comment on is how important are the friendships they made at , how important were the people they got to know.

That same day is also the day when everyone is saying goodbye, and a good few tears are shed. So the last day of the year brings out the upside and the downside of the fact that the friendships that people make are among the most important things of their time at St John’s.

What Is a Friend?

So what is a friend? I suppose I am talking about someone you appreciate, someone you enjoy spending time with, someone you are especially glad to see, someone interesting. But of course there is more to it than that. It is someone you come to trust, someone you come to commit yourself to in some way. It is someone with whom you find yourself sharing who you are, sharing things you might not share with everyone. It is someone you find you want to do things for, give things to, when you know what they like. In Hebrew and Greek two of the common words for “friend” are related to words for “love,” and that tells you something about friendship. It is a form of love. And in Hebrew and in Greek, “love” is a matter of mind, and feelings, and action. You love God with mind and feelings and action, says Deuteronomy, because that is what love is like. Of course our love is a reflection of God’s. God loves with mind, and feelings, and action. God appreciates us, enjoys spending time with us, is glad to see us, finds us interesting, trusts us, make a commitment to us, shares intimate secrets with us.

And all that applies to human relations. So when you love your neighbor as another human being like yourself, this love, too, is a matter of mind, and feelings, and action, like God’s love for us and ours for God. And like love between us and God, of course, it is of the essence that this is two-way. It would not work if only one of two people wanted that kind of friendship.

Again it may be like our love for God in that it tends to happen only gradually. We do not find that the whole of God is forced on us at once, and we do not give all of ourselves to God at once, even if there are moments when we take whole leaps forward in our awareness of being loved by God and in our loving of God. Again this is true of human friendship. It happens gradually, and it happens because both sides subconsciously take the risk of letting it happen, stage by stage.

There is indeed risk. God takes risks in entrusting intimate secrets with us, in sharing the ministry of the Godhead in the world with us, instead of just getting on with it. We take risks with God in opening up our lives to heavenly scrutiny and looking at ourselves through God’s eyes and saying we will do what God wants and go where God wants us to go. We take risks in sharing our inner secrets with each other, too, the risk of looking stupid and sinful and proud and narrow, to the other person, and thus to ourselves.

It takes time and energy, too. That is why there are limits to the number of friends you can have. It is a wonderful fact about God that God has infinite capacity to share with an infinite number of beings, with each of us. But we are not God and we do not have the resources to share with everyone.

So what is the point of taking the risk and expending the energy? Why not hide from other people, as some people do? And why should it be the subject of Christian reflection? One reason is the way our friends change us. As in marriage, which is a form of friendship if you are lucky, our friends may decide they themselves want to change us, and they may succeed in some ways, though these changes may be a bit external. If you could see me, you might think that that my clothes are garish: people say I will have an identity crisis in California because I will be just like everyone else. But you should have seen me before one or two of my colleagues started working on me. They are still working on my driving; usually the best I can do is sit in the back seat and let someone else do it.

The more profound changes come about when people are not trying. Some of them come about because we like something about a friend. It is one of the things that we appreciate about them and we find ourselves thinking the same way as they do. They have changed us. Or maybe we think, “Well, if they reckon that thing is important or interesting or worthwhile, perhaps there is something in it, or at least I would like to find

out about it and understand it because it is part of them.” Or we think “That is off the wall, how can someone possibly think like that?” And if it were anyone else, we would dismiss it, but because it is a friend we do not do that. We want to understand, because we love this other person. And we find that the thing that seemed off the wall is not so crazy after all when looked at through the prism of this other personality. And so we may end up changing our thinking, and our attitudes, and our lives, and therefore our ministries. That is what friendship can do.

There is also a reverse process, because all that is mutual if you are friends. You yourself are off-the-wall in some ways. I know I am, because my colleagues have told me. (I looked up the expression in a dictionary and it said “crazy,” so I looked it up in a different dictionary and it just said “unconventional,” which I found more acceptable, so I bought that dictionary.) I then find that a friend will ask me why I think in a certain way, or act in a certain way, and I have to work it out and say it in a way I have not before. And by that process friends help you discover things about yourself.

You probably do this in the process of saying things that may look stupid or sinful or proud or narrow. But more often than not in my experience, your friend does not think you are stupid (in fact probably tells you that you are stupid for thinking you are stupid) and is not appalled by the skeletons in your cupboard. From time to time I have had the experience of a friend telling me apologetically that something I had tried to do that was meant to be nice or helpful for them, actually worked the opposite way because of something else about them that I could not allow for, and they were very apologetic and felt bad about themselves. In contrast, I was amused and was given an odd kind of pleasure because they had been caused to show me something about themselves which they felt a bit sheepish about, but to me it was just another bit of the jigsaw of this person whom I loved. One of my friends often used to say “Don’t laugh at me” when I grinned at something she shared with me, but my smile was a smile of delight that I had discovered a bit more of her.

Of course the things you discover about yourself through your friendships may be things you do not like, and you may feel you want to change them. If you are really unlucky and have fallen into really bad friendships, as it were, your friend may not let you off the hook. One of the friendships I have most valued was like that. This friend would make the most outrageous, demanding observations about how I lived my life and how I ought to live it and how I thought about things and how I ought to think about them and how I saw myself and how I ought to see myself, and I could not ignore these observations because they came out of love, and they risked changing me; indeed they did change me. In its way this chapter and maybe every chapter in this book is the fruit of friendship. Your friends change you and therefore they change your ministries.

That is the upside of friendship. There are two aspects of the downside that occur to me. I have already hinted at one. There can be a sadness about making friends in some circumstances, because they are likely to be of limited shelf-life. Most of them, even the deep ones, have a short sell-by date. That is why some of those tears are shed at our farewell service. One leaver said to me in some anguish, “Why does God always take people away?” Here she was, moving to a parish in a part of the country where she had never lived before, and having once more to start again. She had had to leave the people she loved in her home town to go the place where she had spent most of her working life before St John’s, then she had had to leave the people she loved there to come to , now she had to leave the people she loved there. You may be able to keep up one or two friendships by occasional visits and you can talk to people on the phone but many of the friendships cannot carry on growing in the way they could before.

A few weeks after the leavers’ service one year, Ann and I had lunch with a couple to whom we had got close and who had left that summer, and it was lovely to be

able to do that, but I found myself feeling sad even while I was there. I realized that this reunion was reminding me that actually we will hardly ever see this couple, compared with the way things had been when we saw them nearly every day. Meetings like that are more reminders of something that had once been, than a growing development of something.

It can be worse. A few years ago we had an Australian couple in college as tutors for a year. When they went back to Australia, one was even more aware of that sadness because they were not just going to Liverpool or Exeter where in theory one could still see them. As far as we knew we would never see each other again till heaven. (The irony is that they have actually been here several times since.) And as I write Ann and I are getting ready to move 6000 miles, and one of the two things that makes me anxious about it is the fact that we thereby effectively lose all the people we love and are loved by. They become part of us and we of them, by the process of mutual influence. So it's like the separating of Siamese twins. "Every time you go away you take a little part of me" (Paul Young). "Every time we say goodbye, I die a little" (Cole Porter).

There is another aspect to the poignancy of all this. When you get to know someone, one of the paradoxical results is that the more you know, the more you realize there is to know. And I guess the converse must be true. The more you let yourself be known, the more mystery there is about you that your friend has seen the corner of and got into dialogue with you about, and therefore the more there is that you might learn about yourself and the more you might be able to grow for God's sake if this friendship continued; and then in that form it has to end.

In John 15 Jesus talks about God pruning us, and I realized that separating from friends, in a sense the loss of them, is part of the pruning process that is involved in life itself and is therefore something that can make us grow. Things are taken away not because there is not growth and not to prevent growth but because there is growth and to encourage more growth. Outside their kitchen window the couple I just referred to had some tomato plants which they had inherited from their cottage's previous occupant. They were plants with lovely yellow flowers and some little green tomatoes, and our friends did not know that in order to grow any proper tomatoes in our climate, you have to stop the pretty yellow flowers growing after the fourth branch. When God takes away, or when life takes away or the system takes away, God can make that the means of more fruit-bearing, not less. It does not take away the sadness involved in the ending of friendships, or the ending of one stage in friendships, but it maybe takes the edge off the sadness. It means it is worth facing the cost for the sake of what we give each other and what we gain.

The Risk

There is another downside involved in making friends, the risk of friendship, a different risk from the one I mentioned earlier. It is a risk that headlines in the newspapers periodically make us aware of, the risk that friendship love can turn into falling in love, and I do not know any watertight ways of ensuring that this does not happen. Now for people who are in a position to fall in love, that may be fine, and no doubt falling in love with a friend is a better idea than trying to make friends with someone you have fallen in love with. There are guidelines for pastoral relationships that can help one avoid the particular forms of risk in those relationships, but the same issues arise in friendships. And it could be that the risks will frighten us about friendships and about pastoring. As with the physical dangers of ministry in the inner city, such as the danger of being mugged, there is no way of eliminating risk.

In discussing “Community” in chapter 5 I talked about people who were sacraments to me when Ann had her seizure. A disproportionate number of them were women (as far as I know, the only people who were identified as Ann’s sons by the nursing staff were her actual sons).

When Harry Met Sally is my all-time number three film (*Paris, Texas* and *Once Upon A Time in America*, if you must know, with *Leaving Las Vegas* number 4: you see, I have dark tastes, and *When Harry Met Sally* only tests the rule, because Harry has such a dark side). But on a good day, what I now feel about it is the same as I do about that Hauerwas remark in chapter 5. That film is deeply illuminating (and a whole lot of fun) but actually wrong. Its theme is that men and women can never be friends, because sex will always get in the way - even if not for the woman, it will for the man, and that is enough. I have long viewed that as a deeply sad but true thesis, but I have felt myself challenged to rethink it.

This started with another piece of pastoral theology, a book on *Sexuality and Spirituality* edited by James Nelson that argued among other things for the possibility of friendships that were sexual without being genital. It talked about that with regard to same-sex friendships between gay people, but also with regard to cross-sex friendships between heterosexual people. I had long assumed that such friendships were bound to be neither one thing nor the other. They were bound to be frustrated, incomplete relationships, all foreplay (as it were). The vision Nelson offers is that there is such a thing as cross-sex friendship that recognizes and rejoices in the sexual nature of the relationship but is not just an unnaturally foreshortened version of an affair. It is not frustrated because the two people do not end up in bed. It is a fulfilled version of something in its own right, not a frustrated version of something else.

This is a dangerous thesis. We live in a generation in which many marriages fall apart and in which many people have affairs, and that is true of Christians and of clergy. In any congregation or among any group of clergy there will thus be a significant number who will have affairs one day, and a significant number whose marriages will break down. I do not believe it is possible to predict which it will be, nor possible for any of us to be sure “It will not be me.”

That is frightening, but objectively it may be even more likely to affect us if we do not acknowledge it. Learning to have true, deep, sexual friendships might make us more likely to end up having an affair, but might have the opposite effect, particularly if we know what we are doing and avoid either demonizing sexual relationships or romanticizing them. They are a resource for us as human beings, and that is true in overlapping ways for people who suspect they are single for life, for people who hope that they are not, for the happily married, for the unhappily married, for heterosexual people and for gay people. They are a resource for us as human beings, and they are therefore a resource for us in ministry. Sex is making it more and more dangerous to be involved in ministry with other people. That is obviously the case with heterosexual people, but you do not necessarily solve anything by avoiding ministry to people of the opposite sex, because you may just end up being tempted, misunderstood, seduced, or accused homosexually. The creative spark that there is in cross-sex relationships is a resource for ministry. It has been an element in some people’s ministry to me over the last few weeks. That is a dangerous fact, but it is a fact.

There are risk-limitation things we can do. As we can try to minister in threes rather than one-to-one, so we can look for our friendships to be inclusive not exclusive. We can talk with someone like a spiritual director about our friendships. We can look for the signs that suggest falling in love rather than friendship, and be prepared to act on what we find. I suspect that this is the biggest thing, for our culture of course assumes that if it is love it must be right, and we are subject to the temptation to think the same thing.

For some of us, such friendship is too dangerous to be risked. I have come adrift in risking it, and I suspect it is too dangerous for me. But in general I think the risk of loss will be greater than the risk we avoid. And the reasons again lie in the fruitfulness of friendship which I have tried to describe. That pruning on God's part can carve space into our lives and take us away from our idols and remove us to a foreign country to enlarge our understanding of God and enable us to discover who we are. Although I did once grow tomatoes, I know virtually nothing else about gardening, but I did once discover something about vines. We were driving through the Vale of Hebron in the West Bank, where some of the best vines grow. It was the first time I had visited the country in the spring and I had never seen vines in their pruned state. They are a terrible sight. Six months ago they were flourishing plants that had grown so extravagantly that they could have curled like a bower over your head and you could have reached up and let the fresh grapes fall into your mouth. Now they have been cut down so that they are nothing more than a black gnarled stump a foot or two high.

You cannot have grapes without being willing to be a vine. You cannot be a vine without being willing to be pruned. You cannot have more grapes next year without being willing to be pruned. But you can grow grapes this year, and your friends will help you.

9 Hope

Not the End of the Story

Imagine that a tourism tycoon announces a competition for the designing of a new hotel in Sarajevo or Belfast or Freetown or wherever happens to be off-limits as a holiday destination when you read this. Imagine that she gives an award to a wondrous plan for an eight-story complex with restaurants, jacuzzis, saunas, discos, and swimming pools. Not only so, but that she sends the plans out to tender and gives the contract to the construction company she fancies.

One day in the 580s BC, Jeremiah the prophet from Anathoth contracts to buy some land in circumstances that were about as absurd (see Jeremiah 32). For the second time in a decade Judah is under invasion from the Babylonians for wanting to run its own life, and Jerusalem is under siege. Jeremiah himself is in prison in Jerusalem. He has been going about declaring that the city will again fall to the Babylonians and that the best thing to do is surrender. This understandably displeases the political authorities, who view Jeremiah as a collaborator, a traitor, and a danger to community morale.

Things are evidently little better for Jeremiah's family. Their village lies a handful of kilometers north of Jerusalem, but lies across the crucial line dividing northern Israel from southern Judah (as today the same village of Anata stands on the boundary of Jerusalem and the West Bank). Where Jeremiah came from will no doubt be another reason for the Jerusalem authorities' deep suspicion of him. He is, after all, not actually one of us.

One can guess that having the Babylonian army camped on your doorstep as it besieges Jerusalem does nothing for the quality of life in Anathoth. Perhaps it was one of the factors that led to the arrival of Jeremiah's cousin Hanamel to see if Jeremiah wanted to buy a piece of land from him. When things are bad, what people often have to do is realize their assets. That might mean selling your animals; in due course it might mean selling yourself and/or members of your family into servitude for a while. In between, it might mean selling some or all of your land (technically, leasing it). But you were not supposed to sell your land to just anyone. The land had been allocated by God to the clans and families of Israel, and it had to stay in the family. You had to see if any of your

relatives could and would buy it. So Hanamel came to pay a prison visit to Jeremiah, not out of a concern for the prisoner's welfare but out of a concern for his own.

Whether we think of the city of Jerusalem or the people of Judah and Israel, or the personal circumstances of Jeremiah or Hanamel, what we find is reason for gloom or anxiety at best, despair and hopelessness at worst. It may resonate with gloom, anxiety, despair, and hopelessness that we know about. In many of mainline churches there is reason enough for such gloom as they contemplate reductions in congregations and economic difficulties. In individual churches, outward flourishing can sometimes conceal deep divisions or persistent inward-lookingness that become the despair of their leadership. The jobs of individual Christians may cause them deep anxieties, if they work in some part of the health service or the school system or higher education, or if they work in business or industry with their ever-increasing demands and pressures, or if they have no job at all. In the dark hours of night their personal lives may bring them near hopelessness as they ask themselves whether their marriages are in terminal decline or how on earth they can handle or help their children.

In a context of gloom, anxiety, hopelessness, and despair, at community and individual levels, Jeremiah puts his shekels on the table and buys the piece of land from Hanamel. I wonder whether Hanamel could hardly believe his luck, whether he danced back to Anathoth laughing at the foolishness of the unworldly-wise prophet in buying land at this perilous moment in history. Is Jeremiah one clan short of a chosen people, one candle short of a menorah? Why did he do it?

He did it because God told him to. Sometimes we do have the experience of knowing that God is pointing us in some direction that seems risky or stupid, and is looking to see how we respond. When some denominations are having a hard time paying their clergy (or even paying for their training) there are still people who are resigning jobs that they like because they believe God is telling them to train for full-time Christian ministry. Humanly it looks a stupid decision. Afterwards, Jeremiah learned more; God told him something of what lay behind the revelation that Hanamel was coming and the instruction that Jeremiah was to say yes. Often it is the case that only afterwards do we see why God looked for a particular step or allowed a particular thing to happen. In Jeremiah's case, it was a sign that the invasion of the land and the siege of the city by the Babylonians were not the end of the story. It will again be the case that fields and vineyards will be worth selling here. God has not finished with the city of Jerusalem and with the people of Judah and Benjamin and with individual people like Jeremiah and Hanamel. God still has their destiny in mind.

Why? How do we know? In part because this is not only not the end of the story; it is not the beginning of the story. Jeremiah knows that. After signing the contract he offers God a prayer that might seem to read more like a history lesson. In Jeremiah 32 he summarizes how God created the world, delivered Israel from Egypt, gave them their land, but how this story now seems to be running into the sands of Babylonian occupation and transportation. There is some irony about the fact that Jeremiah himself does not seem quite to see the point of his own story. As is often the case, his very question contains the seeds of its own answer. How can God let this story run into the sand? Of course God cannot. The burden of the promises of the prophets of the exile is that the promises of God that go back to Abraham still apply. All they need is restating. Arguably that is all these prophets do. The hope of Jerusalem, Judah, Benjamin, Jeremiah, and Hanamel is the hope of a story and a divine commitment that go back to Abraham.

The hope of the church and of the individual Christian believer lies in the same realities, the same story and the same commitment, now underlined by what God has done in Jesus. Might the church die out? Denominations may die out – existing “old” denominations, and “new” ones that now seem vibrant and full of life. Patterns of

ministry may change. Congregations may grow and shrink. Jobs may change. Yes, marriages may break down, parents make terrible mistakes, and children turn their backs on them. All these things may indeed be happening before our eyes.

But they have written over them the promise “Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land.” As the church we are entitled to be certain that God is committed to us, for the church itself is the fruit of that original unbreakable commitment to Abraham. As individuals we are entitled to the certainty that God is working out a purpose for us, that the promise embraces us.

Yes, says God, this city is to be given into the hands of the Babylonians. And when that happens, it will be nasty. The king, for instance, will be blinded as an act of sadistic punishment before he is taken off to Babylon itself, and as another act of sadistic punishment the last sight his eyes will see, the last image Zedekiah will take with him to Babylon, is the sight of his two sons being killed before him. But all this will not be the end. After that, “I will surely gather them from all the lands where I banish them.... I will bring them back to this place and I will let them live in safety. They will be my people, and I will be their God.... I will rejoice in doing them good and I will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul” (Jeremiah 32:37-41).

It's not over till it's over. The moments of justified anxiety, gloom, hopelessness, and despair stand under the promise of God. We may not be able to see how God can bring fruitfulness from them until afterwards, but we can believe that God will.

Soaking and Hoping

Hoping is a familiar biblical and theological theme. Soaking is one I have invented.

I once took part in a Holy Week retreat. It involved me in more church services than any other week of my life and in reading through the Gospel story in every possible version and through most of the sections of the Epistles that expound the significance of Jesus' passion and through most of the Psalms that you could have imagined on Jesus' lips on the last days of his life, ones that illumine his experience. I realized towards the end of the week that I felt as if I had been enveloped, soaked, immersed in the passion story in a more powerful way than I ever remember. No matter what else I did that week when I was not in one of those services, I could not get away from the passion story. In one way it was a bit confusing because I found myself at midday having to read a section of Luke's Gospel relating to events that took place earlier than the section of Mark's Gospel that we had read earlier that morning, but in a strange way that heightened the soaking effect of living in the passion story for a week.

We inevitably live our lives in the world and in the church not by the passion story but by the values and the story of the world and of our own experience. And what we mostly need in our Christian lives is not some new truth that no one has told us yet, but the old truth coming home to us afresh month by month and year by year and decade by decade. It is the thing that will then shape our thinking and shape our lives. We need to be immersed in that counter-story, that story that opposes the world's story.

It so happened that after celebrating the resurrection at the dawning of Easter Sunday, I then flew to Israel, and on Easter Monday morning I was sitting in my very favorite place in all the world, the terrace of the YMCA guest house, Peniel-by-Galilee, looking over the Lake. I began to do something I had often told students to do but had never done myself, reading through the Galilee half of Mark's Gospel sitting in that place where you can actually see Capernaum, Bethsaida, Chorazim, and some other places that are traditionally associated with events in Jesus' life, and soaking myself in the pre-passion story, visualizing it unfolding before my eyes. But it was also Easter Week, and I

continued working through the day-by-day lectionary readings, quite a lot of which focus on Galilee: “Get up to Galilee,” Jesus says as soon as he is risen, and there Jesus asks Peter those questions about love, and commissions him near Lake Galilee. At the same time the lectionary had us reading through 1 Peter with its beginning that asserts how Jesus’ resurrection rebirths us to a living hope.

For me that was the link between soaking and hoping. That soaking in the reality of the story of Jesus as the one who lived and taught and exercised that ministry there, and died and rose for me, reminded me of the basis for living hope. The soaking was key to the hoping. If I was to be a person of hope, it was on the basis of that story and of my being soaked in it.

It happened at a time I needed it. I had been going through a frustrating period of my life and not succeeding in completing a project I wanted to finish, and I had got depressed in a clinical sense. As it happened I had attended some lectures on pastoral theology, lectures on “Hoping and Wishing.” The lecturer referred quite often to “hopelessness,” and I realized that each time he said the word I found it difficult. The word hurt me in the guts. I realized that my having got depressed and my hopelessness were related. One does get depressed or hopeless about particular things from time to time, but they can trip you into general hopelessness; that was what had happened to me.

But I also realized that you can only let yourself become aware of the reality of hopelessness, of the reasons for it, when you have realized that there are reasons for hope. It is unwise to think about hoping until you know there is a basis for it. It is difficult to face up to hopelessness until you know there might be an answer to it, a way of facing it.

I once said to Ann, “Would you like a cream cake with your cup of tea?” She replied “Have you got one?” She was a wise lady. She did not wish to be conned into playing with the idea of a cream cake if I was about to reply “Tough, I forget to buy any.” First discover of there is something to hope for, then hope for it.

The good news of the gospel is that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has given us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We hide from our hopelessness. But there are grounds for hope, and therefore it can be faced.

Isaiah 25 promises a day when the veil of mourning is taken away from everyone and God wipes away the tears from everyone’s eyes and takes away the reproach of the people of God. God promises to handle our individual pains and griefs, and the reproach of the people of God which is also so depressing.

We are invited to name our hopelessnesses, about our own lives and about the church and about the world, because the resurrection of Jesus makes it possible to take the risk of doing that. It is the guarantee that there is hope in all these areas. That does not resolve the dialectic between glory and pain. Indeed in coming to face hopelessness because of the resurrection, that takes you back into the pain of the cross. But at least it does not leave you living with nothing, with unacknowledged pain.

We are invited to name our hopelessnesses and to let ourselves be soaked, enfolded, immersed in the counter-story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, because they are the basis for hope.

L’Arche

Just north of Paris at Trosly-Breuil is the original home of the L’Arche community, which brings together disabled and ordinary people to share their lives. One weekend Ann and I were there for a gathering of twenty professors, bishops, and other mortals from France, Belgium, Canada, and Britain to discuss the theology of disability – or rather, as the invitation put it, “to discuss how Jesus touches us in and through the poor,

the broken, and the weak” – in the light of our own experience. The program consisted chiefly of us simply sharing our “testimonies.”

I have referred already to the ministry Ann exercises within St John’s and elsewhere. When I go off to speak at some conference, often the thing people take away is not anything I have said but their meeting with Ann, though they rarely articulate what it is that has affected them. My guess is that she embodies human characteristics that belong to us all but that we normally seek to evade, such as fragility, dependence, and uncertainty. She brings these demons out into the open in such a way that they cease to be demons. Indeed, she reveals that they are angels. They are part of being human, part of the nakedness that humanity originally wore without shame, and they are therefore part of imaging God. Disabled people in their fragility, dependence, and uncertainty embody the other side of that image. Ann then affirms the presence of God with her in her disability.

Disability through an illness like multiple sclerosis is not the same as the usually lifelong disability of the handicapped members of L’Arche, but it raises overlapping human and theological questions, as well as some questions of its own. The woman I married was not fragile, dependent, and uncertain, but a person of independence, initiative, drive, and energy, who kept lots of balls in the air and in some respects behaved like a feminist before such were invented. I have been married to two personalities within the same body, yet to one human being. This must relativize the importance of “personality” in the sense that the notion is so important to us and must point to less self-contained bases for understanding the intrinsically human.

One consistent feature of Ann is the web of relationships in which she has been involved with family and friends. Being human is being in relationship, as the original Genesis 1 statement about the creation of humanity implies. “They smile, and therefore we are.” Our essential humanity and value lie in being in such relationships of receiving and giving. This is true for disabled and ordinary alike, but the former may unveil the fact.

Another feature is the continuous story that Ann has lived, in relationship. The story bridges that change in who she is and it is destined to continue towards those transforming changes that will embrace us all. It must be, then, that such changes do not threaten what authentic humanity means. Everyone has a story, even (especially?) the most disabled, the most poor, the most unpleasant, and the most wicked, and it is often the story of such which is the most worth hearing and the most illuminating.

Another consistent feature of Ann is the physical body itself, recognizably one for all the change that has come about because of those wretchedly sclerosed myelin sheathes that prevent messages passing between brain and limbs. It draws attention to the important physical base to human personality. “L’Arche is founded upon the body,” Jean Vanier has written. It cannot be dualist. It involves “a communication where body language is an essential component.”

Part of the philosophy of L’Arche itself is that the relationship between the disabled and the ordinary is two-way. Each gains from the other. People who work in L’Arche communities speak movingly of the ministry the disabled exercise to them. “Every person, even the most handicapped, is called to be a source of grace and of peace for the whole community, for the Church and for humanity,” declares the related “Faith and Light” movement, which brings together families with disabled people for sharing, fiesta, celebration, and prayer. And when it comes to celebration, says the Faith and Light charter, the handicapped are often less disabled than others because they are not imprisoned by convention, worry about efficiency, or fear of what others may think (anyone who has taken a service in a mental hospital will recognize the point). They live more simply in the present moment, their humility and transparency making them naturally disposed towards community festivity. “The handicapped person,” said one of the participants in our colloquium, furthermore “helps us discover our own identity. Our

gifts and competence are never adequate and they transform these in order that we may respond to their real needs; we thereby discover who we are.”

It is possible for the disabled to be the victims of other people’s need to organize, dominate, or do miracles. God does not organize, dominate, or do miracles for Ann. God lets her be. Perhaps she ministers to God. I know in myself that the disabled exercise an important ministry to the ordinary. Students at St John’s may reckon from time to time that the principal is a so-and-so: as well as having institutional power which I can misuse, I can beat them in an argument most of the time if I choose to do so. As I suggested in the Introduction to this book, imagine what a so-and-so I might have been if it were not for the positive shaping effect on me of Ann’s disability. I know she slows me down, for good; often we will be processing through the St John’s dining room with half the community behind us, but I have the impression no-one minds. She makes me appreciate simple things, like squirrels and clouds and the swaying of the willow tree outside our house. At L’Arche “the basic mode of existence is by necessity contemplative rather than activist” and that offers an important witness regarding the nature of theology, church, and world.

There is another shaping too. My pain can wash over into my functioning in college in a negative way. One of my best friends once called me “volatile,” unpredictable in how I may react depending on how I am inside. Ann’s illness frees both tears and frustration, both love and anger, both resilience and guilty powerlessness (“Why can’t I make it okay?”). Giving yourself to the poor or disabled, someone at L’Arche commented, can be for us the equivalent of going into the solitude of the desert to allow ourselves to be confronted by the demons within.

It is often hard to convince Ann of the positive effect she has on other people or on me. Indeed I am myself not sure exactly what is the nature of that effect, as I do not know who I would be if I were not Ann’s husband, shaped by who she is. We and God use her, without scruple (as Paul has God reaffirming, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and will have compassion on whom I have compassion”). We and God gain from her disability. For her there is often no felt gain. It is wholly loss. I trust that God grieves over that as well as using her. Apparently God does not mind such waste; God has some other concern.

Someone during the weekend said, “The handicapped person helps us discover our own identity. Our gifts and competence are never adequate and they transform these in order that we may respond to their real needs; we thereby discover who we are. In addition they discover what they are by what they call forth in us.” I dearly wish all this to be true, and believe it is true up to the last sentence; it is not clear to me that that last sentence is true. Ann now has less comprehension of who she is than she had ten years ago, and little comprehension of what she calls forth in people (except when I keep telling her). We must no more romanticize the disabled than marginalize them.

Over tea on the Sunday afternoon that weekend I made a point of a conversation with Francis Young, one of its organizers, the mother of a severely disabled son who is the subject of her book *Face to Face*. I wanted to say how much I had appreciated the opportunity for the first time to talk about Ann and me in the presence of people who knew from their own analogous experience what I meant. She gave me an awesomely fierce hug and said something like “I hope one day there will be something positive for you.” They were almost the last words that were said to me before we left, and they were going round my head and my heart for the subsequent thirty-six hours. They somehow brought to the surface for me a hopelessness that I myself feel about Ann and that I had not quite confessed to myself but had apparently communicated in my “testimony” (!). Now I feel like John Cleese (in a wonderful moment in the film *Clockwise*), when he says “It’s not the despair I can’t stand, it’s the hope.” (Actually, I subsequently discovered that

what Francis said to me over tea was that she hoped I gained something positive out of the weekend; I think Freud commented on how significant our mishearings are....)

Yet I must not give the wrong impression. One day I cried out to God as I stood in my study, looking out over the courtyard, "I can't do it," and God replied, "You'll just have to." That sounds hard but in a strange way came as reassurance; it reminds me now of Gerhard von Rad's emphasis on the revelation of the Torah to Israel being a gift rather than an imposition. If God lays an expectation on you, it will not be one impossible to fulfill. Since then I have often cried out "Will it be all right?" and always known God say "Yes." And it always has been.

On the way to Dover on the Friday an apologetic policeman spot-fined me for speeding on the A2, but you can now drive from the Calais hoverport to Paris in two hours without breaking the speed limit. On the way back from Paris to the Channel on the Sunday evening, to the left was the most spectacular golden, red, yellow, and orange sunset, to the right darkness and gloom over the Pays de Calais slagheaps, in front a massive cloudbank over the Channel, beneath the cloudbank a sea that felt less rough than the hoverport said it was, and behind it some English rain. Some things depend on perspective, but not everything.

In his comments on Bruce Springsteen in his book *Hungry for Heaven*, Steve Turner suggests that a tension between humanity's "heavenly calling" and "earthly imprisonment" is the theme of Springsteen's best work. "In a typical small-town situation he sees two different sorts of people. There are those who resign themselves to mediocrity and those who burn with a passion to transcend their circumstances." With wonderful melodrama Springsteen relates how someone whose life feels hopeless urges "Wendy" to get out of this empty town with him, to let him in to be her friend and guard her "dreams and visions," to join him in going somewhere where they can walk in the sun, and in the meantime "live with the sadness." But till then, tramps like us, baby we were born to run."

But "having articulated a religious question, he doesn't have a religious answer. Springsteen, I believe, realises that a religious answer is needed and compensates by dressing essentially existential advice in glorious heavenly language" (Turner).

10 Identity

I have talked about the release we experience when we put down a burden and let our tensed muscles relax, and the way it may be only then that we realize that we were carrying a heavy load. The experience of doing this can also raise questions of identity, for our carrying responsibilities is integral to identity for many of us.

Many Rivers to Cross

A few years ago Ann and I had our first holiday together on our own after our two sons had grown up, and somehow it brought home to me a frightening realization about who I was – namely Ann's husband. At the center I was not a theologian or a teacher or a minister or a scholar or a principal; those were not what defined who I was. Who I was was Ann's husband. Which means, I realized (and this was the frightening bit), that when she dies, I shall not know who I am. (She may well outlive me, I should perhaps add: people with multiple sclerosis have shorter life expectancy than other people, but men have shorter life expectancy than women, so those two considerations cancel each other out)

I realized that threatening fact anew when she had her seizure. When she was admitted to hospital, a neurologist reassured me that she would fully recover, but as she lay in a cot unable to move, except for the one arm flapping about with a mind of its own, that was not easy to believe. The nursing staff did not believe it either ("I don't think she will ever feed herself again," one said); for that matter the neurologist later told me that he was not sure he had believed his own words, but I guess he was going by the book and he was right. Indeed, some weeks after leaving hospital Ann actually had more mobility than she had had before her seizure. Someone told me of a woman in the U.S.A. whose multiple sclerosis was cured as a result of being struck by lightning; perhaps Ann's seizure had a little of the same affect. But in those dark early morning hours when I did not know what was happening, I wondered if she was dying, and in those early days in hospital, those questions had not wholly gone away, and again I found myself thinking the selfish thought that if she died I would not know who I was, because my identity (I felt) was defined by her. Who would I be if I did not have this burden? If I think of "me" separately from Ann, I am not clear what I meant by the notion of "me," though in a way it is no more true of me in this particular relationship than it is true of all of us because of the way our relationships shape us. If I answered, "Someone with a full head of brown hair," it might make the idea of not having the burden attractive. But it makes me feel insecure.

Many years ago, before we knew that Ann might one day be wheelchair-bound, we knew a man whose wife had a chronic illness and was wheelchair-bound. He always looked disheveled and ill-shaven, but I thought that was just the way he was as a person. Then we lost touch with them, and his wife died, and after a year or two he married again. Shortly after that we met him again, and he was transformed into someone who looked smart and bright and alive. I wondered whether there was some sense in which I am at the former stage. My friends do not recognize the portrait, but I still wonder how things would be different. I know that Ann is a different person from the one she once was, and so am I.

Ann's being in hospital meant that I had to come on my own into our main community midweek supper. Other weeks I would invariably come into that Thursday supper with her on my arm, but now I had to walk into the meal alone. I did not know who I was, because she shapes who I am. As I have hinted in the Introduction above, to a degree any husband or wife does that, but it feels as if this is true in distinctive ways, because who I am is the husband of someone who has this grim illness, and because the handling of that is so central in the shaping of my life. Being without Ann and thinking of a day when that might be a permanency made me realize that I was not sure who I really was or whether I really existed. Is it the case that all we are is a series of potentials that then become realized, but only in part, in relation to the people we become involved with and the experiences that happen to us? So I could have been realized in some other way? And the potentials are still there; I could still be realized in other ways. Oddly, however, at the same time living virtually without Ann for those four weeks and living and relating to other people in new ways strangely reassured me that there is a person here who exists in his own right, a person who one day I may find myself getting to know, but for the moment that person is suppressed. To adapt Brian Keenan's wonderful image, Humpty Dumpty has to stay as he is for the moment; the extra pieces have to remain in store.

I was thinking about all this when one day I heard the Jimmy Cliff song *Many Rivers to Cross*, one of the classic reggae songs. Out of interest, and perhaps with a view to singing it one day, I settled down to work out all the words (these were pre-internet days). In the shorter term I found myself in tears over them because so much of them expressed what I was feeling about life at that time. The song speaks of there being all those rivers to cross and it's only my will that keeps me alive. Maybe I only survive

because of my pride. And “the loneliness won’t leave me alone” because the person I once knew is gone, and all sorts of temptations assail me, but I just have to keep looking for the way to cross the rivers.

I think there is a link with a picture that came to develop in my mind. I am pushing Ann’s wheelchair toward the horizon. I am viewing us from behind, so I see my back and a bit of the wheelchair; I can’t actually see Ann. It is a bare landscape and there is quite a distance to the horizon towards which I push, but the ground is fairly level and the pushing just requires commitment and grit and persistence. A key point is that the distance to the horizon is finite and that I cannot see how far the journey goes beyond the horizon. In theory there may be many horizons to travel (many rivers to cross), but I do not have to visualize or face the fact of that long a journey – just the one horizon. Perhaps that may be the only one, so that the pushing ends just beyond the visible horizon. The other key point is that there are only the two of us, and there is thus only me pushing. A single horizon and a lone push; on my own by my willpower I can just manage one horizon at a time, not quite facing things that Jimmy Cliff expresses.

The alternative picture that started to nudge itself upon me had two elements to it. My viewpoint changes, in the vertical plane. I zoom up, as happens in a film when the camera is elevated on a Simon Snorkel or in a balloon or whatever. That means the horizon vastly lengthens, and I can see that the journey, the push, is much, much longer than I can see from ground level. There are indeed many rivers. There is no longer any avoiding the prospect of the push lasting ten or twenty years, not just two or five (it may become more mountainous, too).

The other element is that the Simon Snorkel descends back to near ground level and I see other people, in ones and twos and threes, coming to join me behind the wheelchair. (I cry as I write this bit.) Some are people I know, some are people I do not yet know (some are people I have known). Some just walk with me. Some take a handle. Some gently push me out of the way and push the wheelchair themselves. Ann is content as long as someone is pushing. (That seems very important: it places a question mark by my assumption of indispensability, which is part of my identity.) I walk with them in the little crowd, content myself, more relaxed, unaccustomed to the luxury of walking without pushing. (I cry some more.) We talk quite a bit and laugh quite a bit. Someone ruffles my hair. The people change; some walk alongside for longer than others. The number of them changes; sometimes there are one or two, sometimes eight or ten. From where I am, because of the other people I can no longer see whether the countryside is bare, nor am I so aware of the distance to the horizon(s) or of how far we travel. I can now commit myself to the ten or twenty years while also living in the present more, rather than being tempted to postpone living till some future which may never come.

Dependence

I once compared notes with another “single carer” and we discussed the question whether it was too risky to become dependent on there being other people there to help, because you have to be able to cope if the chips go down and you are on your own. I guess the picture summons me to the risk.

One of the results on Ann’s seizure was that some people forced their way into my life out of love for me and for her. When I have a bout of ‘flu like the one that caught me when she was ill, I like just to hide away on my own until I feel better; I do not appreciate people trying to look after me. The kind of people who like being looked after no doubt are the kind who try to look after others in that situation, and such people used to ignore the notices I put on my door saying I was in bed (because they had peered round the back and discovered that I was not) and offered strange signs of caring such as the gift of

refectory food to which I have referred (actually college food is rather good, but I wasn't up to eating much).

That forcing their way into our lives continued after the crisis was over. It might have been tempting to assume that people were sorry for us and/or were being "pastoral," and if that had been so, I would still have appreciated it. In another context a seminary professor whose marriage had broken up described to me how someone who taught pastoral theology spent time with him every week for months as he coped with his grief, and I remember thinking that this showed that pastoral care was not merely something that teacher taught as theory. You cannot assume that things will work out thus (those who can, do, those who can't, teach). But it became clear that these people who forced their way into our lives were not merely feeling sorry for me or being pastoral but were doing so because they liked me.

I feel self-conscious writing that last phrase, which is significant in some way, because I do not very often feel self-conscious about anything. I often say that embarrassment is one of those capacities that were left out when I was born. I know I have the capacity to be vulnerable in a way that lots of people cannot. I do not mind crying in public (which is as well, because often I cannot avoid it). In teaching and preaching and writing I have come to make a point of verbalizing anxieties and senses of inadequacy because I know that these feelings are not peculiar to me. Other people feel them, but because they are less insensitive than I am, they may not express them. So I hope this frees them to get their own demons out of their cupboards. Perhaps it is my own experience of something that I think I see happening with Ann. In her weakness and vulnerability she embodies what most of us feel we are inside. She brings these demons out into the open and thereby exorcises them.

But there was something paradoxical there. When there was discussion of whether I should be made Principal of St John's, and for that matter on at least one earlier occasion when there had been discussion of whether I should be "promoted" to some position of further responsibility within college, the difficulty had been raised that I can be defensive/aggressive. In meetings or lectures I put people down, without realizing what I am doing. That suggests that I lack inner strength and confidence. Yet being able to be open about weakness implies some inner strength or confidence. What is the relationship between the strength that makes it possible to be open about weakness, and the weakness that makes it necessary to assert strength? Perhaps it is that in the former case I am in control; I choose to let myself cry (more or less). In the latter case other people are seeking to set the agenda and I am not so clearly in control.

I was talking with another student and found myself commenting that of course I took my strong points for granted and only took seriously my weaknesses. She commented that she thought it was women who did that! But in saying it, I realized that I was growing a little with regard to it and was more able in a good sense to believe in and live on the basis of the strong points, to be myself and shrug my shoulders more now. I would once have been hurt by the exposure of some failure; now I am better at acknowledging it and regretting it without being chewed up by it.

In this I have more of a problem with men than with women, and I think women find me easier than men do. There is a fascinating book by Richard Olivier about his relationship with his father, the actor Lawrence Olivier. At first I contrasted his feelings about his father's death with mine about my father's death. When my father died, at 65 but quite suddenly, I kept saying "But I never knew him"; and now it was too late. I thought I meant "I didn't know what he was like, I didn't know what made him tick," because he was a private or shy person. But I was talking about this book with a friend, and she asked (because of a question she had been thinking about) "Do you think we ever really know anyone else, or are known by them?" In an ultimate sense that may be true,

but we do grow in knowledge. It has been a paradoxical thing that I have been aware of with regard to one or two people that the more I have got to know them, the less I know them in the sense of being able to sum them up simply, in a list of epithets, as I might have done when I did not know them. It is the same with God.

But the question about whether we ever really know someone made me realize that I did not (just) mean that I did not have much insight into my father, but that we had never really been friends. I wondered whether I had failed to make the same transfer from mother to father that Olivier failed to make (without my being stony-hearted as he sees himself to have been; at least I am not that now; and I think I have the deep male energy lying below the nurturing second layer, which Olivier also talks about). And I wondered whether that was why it seemed to be men who were usually a threat to me rather than women. I also wondered whether my first boss, whose comment on the Psalms I mentioned in chapter 1, was in Olivier's terms my mentor. He had himself once said that when your father died you became a man, and I recalled that observation when my father indeed died, with some puzzlement because I did not feel anything of that. But then my boss himself became ill, and I visited him in hospital, and soon after he died; and I remember feeling that then I became a man. (And I wondered about my sons and their relationship with me as their father.)

Somewhere here I suspect there is a link with things that go back to childhood, as is the case with many of our adult oddities. I came from an ordinary "upper working class" background in Birmingham. No one in my family had ever been to grammar school, let alone to the most prestigious school in the city. When I went there, I therefore felt on my own and had to be able to cope, to be self-sufficient. And there, it was academic achievement that counted. When I gained a place at Oxford, there was no danger of pride, because there were a dozen or twenty people who got scholarships to Oxbridge from our school. I failed to do that, so I hardly counted. Even now, getting an article or a book published is important but it does not seem so much of an achievement; it is simply what I do. But discovering that someone likes spending time with me gives me a quite different buzz.

Over a period of a year or two I began to get used to the idea that some people enjoyed my company. I remember a particular conversation with a person who felt the same way as I did and was hesitant (for instance) about just calling in to see someone on the assumption that one would be welcome. I knew that I would be welcomed in the sense that people would want to do the pastoral, Christian thing, but I was not sure that I would be welcome in the more general sense, welcome because of who I was and not just because I was a person in need. We agreed that we would always welcome each other.

Knowing and Loving

What is it that makes me, or anyone else, or God, attractive to me or to anyone else or to God? Again there are paradoxes here. If we are describing a friend to someone, we probably refer to some attributes. By implication, I enjoy that person's company because he is sensitive or fun or because he likes rock and roll or is an interesting theologian. Yet it is not actually a specifiable list of attributes (or only a list that goes on until infinity) that draws us into friendship with people. It is more something like an intuitive sense that there is someone attractive here. Perhaps everyone is likeable in this sense; the question is whether that likeableness is on the surface or is recognized, or whether it is hidden.

There is then an important dialectical relationship between knowing and loving. Having begun to know, I begin to love. Beginning thus to love, I get to know more because the other person is more willing to be known. Getting to know more, I love more

because I understand more. Loving more, I get to know more. And that goes on for ever. And it is true of relations among human beings, between us and God, and between me and me.

If the knowing is not merely having a list of attributes, what is it? To judge from the way the Bible works, as well as to conform to a trendy current insight, it involves narrative. The knowing comes about through listening to stories. When we want to characterize each other, we will often do so by telling a story that sums up the person. (My story about the cheesecake and the chocolate bar in chapter 1 was designed to sum up something about what Ann does to people, but it also sums up the person of our host that day.)

In the Bible, God is known as one who has certain attributes. The classic list comes first in Exodus 34 and often recurs: it is that Yahweh is compassionate and gracious, long-tempered and abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love and forgiving shortcomings, though in the end not soft. But that characterization of God comes in the midst of a gargantuan narrative extending from Genesis to Kings and then in the midst of further narratives in Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Ruth, Jonah, and elsewhere. Those narratives do all sorts of things, but one thing they do is establish who God is. Stories do that. They give life to adjectives and nouns.

But the list in Exodus 34 shows that there is something to be said for adjectives and nouns. There is a significant overall picture painted by the stress on God's friendly side, for instance, but a significant solemn addition in the refusal to omit the tough side. And I have found that the same is true about human characterization.

A few weeks after Ann's seizure, when life was beginning to get back to normal, a friend asked whether it was time I talked out with someone the implications of the experience for me personally – indeed the broader implications of coping with Ann's illness, and how I felt about that. I had in fact wondered about that myself and I got in touch with a former student who is a hospital chaplain and has a counseling ministry, and went to see him half-a-dozen times. It was extremely useful, and some of the resultant insights appear in this book.

In due course he and I began to wonder whether we had done the main business in that connection, and whether we were to go anywhere else from here or simply call it a day. About that time it happened that we had a time of prayer for healing in a St John's chapel service, and I felt compelled to go out for prayer. The way the system worked was that it was usual to say to the couple who were praying for you just a sentence or two about what you wanted prayer for, and I said that I actually felt odd about it because I was more in a mood for thanksgiving for what God had done both for Ann and for me than feeling the need for prayer.

The person who prayed with me said that she felt that I had a barrier like a shield around me preventing access. Precisely because of what I have said about vulnerability, I was surprised. I thought that whatever faults I may have, shutting people out was not one of them. She wondered whether what it might mean (that is, as often happens, the picture was what she was given, but the interpretation was her guess) was that the shield was there not to keep other people out but to keep me out. What God was inviting me to do was to discover who I was, to let myself into myself. (I wonder now whether the ease of letting other people see what made me tick – no doubt selectively, as I suggested in chapter 1 – was a cover for avoiding doing that myself.) I was immediately clear what the counseling agenda therefore was.

Over recent years I have grown or changed a lot, I think, through coping with Ann. As I have said, my identity is tied up with her. What I am is her husband. I said this to a friend once and got told off. I was someone in myself. God was now bidding me discover who that was. A day or two after, I had to compose a paragraph about myself for

some purpose. Such paragraphs usually go “The Revd Dr John Goldingay is Principal of St John’s College, Nottingham. He has written a number of books on the Old Testament. He is married to Ann, who has multiple sclerosis.” As I have hinted, I have been tempted to think that in real terms all it need say is the last sentence. That is who I am. I decided to try to say who I was irrespective of work and in myself, and began “John Goldingay is an enthusiast about rock, blues, and jazz.”

I told all this to the counselor. When I got to the last bit he shot bolt upright in his chair. That was significant in itself. He is the kind of counselor who normally sits impassive and unreactive; it is extremely frustrating and usually extremely effective. This time he shot up and said “Yes! You’re an enthusiast.” Now in my mind the stress had been on what I was enthusiastic about, but he showed me another more important implication of what I had written. There was something about my personality there in the word “enthusiast.” And I could immediately recognize it, though I had not seen it as clearly before.

Somehow this is an example of loving and thus knowing. Although Martin would sit there impassive and unreactive because that helped the counseling process, I knew that this did not signify coldness. I think I knew that he loved me. His uncharacteristic outburst was an expression of love, the more powerful because of its rarity, and of love that had issued in insight for him and thus in insight for me.

I remember feeling that I had had set in front of me the empty outline of the shape of a person, like a child’s drawing, and that I now had the first word, the first attribute, to put inside it. For a while I had a hard time finding other words to put into the person-shaped blank. I can think of two reasons for that. One is that some, like vulnerability are related to Ann, and I wanted to find things that are not contingent on that. The other is that I had not quite dared to believe the words, even when they had come from other people. I guess this is one reason why I am not going to list them all here, but just the next five: imaginative, colorful, physical, unassuming, dangerous. I especially like the last, which was our bass-player’s description of me as lead-singer, but I will comment on just the first of those. I think I may be able now to believe more deeply that I am imaginative as well as analytical. I have had people say that and I can sense it in myself, but I did not really dare believe it. After all, if I did believe that I had positive qualities, the descriptions might then turn out to be wrong, and my inner suspicion that there is little positive to say about me would be powerfully reinforced. So the risk is too great.

Because of something one of our students happened to say over lunch, I told him about the visit to the counselor and about discovering I was an enthusiast. The college is named after St John the Evangelist, and the student later told me he had been thinking about “St John the Enthusiast,” as an equivalent to St John the Evangelist. That made me remember that *enthousiastes* would be a Greek word that would mean “filled with God” or “inspired,” and that my enthusiasm could be something from God and through which God worked. The same is true of being imaginative/creative, because God is the very source of imagination/creativity. So discovering things about identity could be not merely something that made a neurotic person feel a bit better, but something that related to my living for God.

One example. I used to get angry with Ann when she slighted me – when she talked to me as if I am incredibly stupid for misunderstanding her. “Where are we?” she asked as we left a motorway restaurant. “Near Weston-Super-Mare,” I replied. “I mean where is the car?” she retorted scathingly and dismissively. I then tore strips off her for talking to me as if I was dirt and I told her never to do it again, and she got angry and cried. Before we went to bed we made up, but I know it is an example of something that happens from time to time. Her frustration with her lot finds transferred expression in hostility to me, and for some reason I find it difficult to cope with that particular

expression of it. Eventually I realized it was because it hooks memories from childhood (not that my mother ever intends to be scathing, any more than Ann does). Now I have realized that this is what happens, I am less vulnerable to it.

11 Joy

“You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,” the angel said to Zechariah (Luke 1:14). And when his wife went to see Mary, the baby in her womb “leaped for joy” (1:44). And when he was born, her neighbors and relative “shared her joy” (1:57). And when the angels appeared to the shepherds, they brought them news of “great joy” for everyone (2:10).

What is Joy?

So what is joy? First, let us not be rude about noisiness. The kind of rejoicing that the Bible talks most of is a noisy affair. It is a matter of celebration, loud music, shouting, dancing. When there is joy about, it can be heard from a long way away. Joy is associated with harvest and winning battles, with feasting and drinking. Modern books on spirituality tend to imply that spirituality is an “introvert” business (in the Myers-Briggs sense). They talk about going to the depths and about the journey inward, and so on. Most of the time the Bible’s spirituality of joy is an “extrovert” on. So it is a spirituality for the majority, an asset in mission and ministry, an invitation to your shadow side.

But some Christians are introverts, and maybe need to start somewhere else. In odd corners of the Bible introverts can find a joy for them. Here is Psalm 4:7: “You have put joy in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound.” Jeremiah, that great introvert: “Your words were my joy and my heart’s delight” (15:16). And I suppose it is a sign of the dominance of introvert spirituality that we think of joy as a matter of the heart. It is closely related to peace, I think. Peace is an inner acceptance of things, but it is more passive. Joy is an inner liftedness of spirit that means we do more than just cope inside when things are tough, we are happy inside even if things are hard outside. Inside us and in private our hands are raised in worship. How can that be?

One summer someone said to me, “You’re not bad at producing the fruit of the Spirit really, except joy, you’re not very good at joy.” It made me think, of course. I knew that I was often morose, for personality and circumstantial reasons, and not very good at hiding my feelings, and I do not think I had quite seen moroseness and joy as something to bring to God. So I did. I asked God for a spirit of joy. And God gave me that, for much of the latter part of that summer. Humanly speaking, that was possible because there had been some holiday and I had shed responsibility. Then, when I had to take on responsibilities again, joy went. So I asked God to give it back, not expecting that to work, and God did. And it went again under pressure, but I knew it was in part because of neglect, and I thought I had to say goodbye and accept that this was all my fault, but I asked for it back once more, not expecting that to work, and again God gave it me back.

In the end that fitted with something I learned through a book about Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, which saw the key to Galatians as the question whether people were trying to continue by means of the flesh, when they began by means of the Spirit. If joy was a gift, a fruit of the Spirit’s presence, there was no reason why God should not give it at any moment. It was not dependent on my persistence or failure, but on God’s giving. Not that I did nothing: I did sing through a lot of praise songs on my own on two or three occasions. But that would have got nowhere without God’s giving. And perhaps that might be true for anyone, with joy or with whatever gift or fruit we would like: that if we

are serious about these things being God's gifts and not dependent on us, we might even ask God to give them.

There is a wonderful Glasgow band called "The Blue Nile." They are perfectionists and they release an album only once every six years. 1996's was called "Peace at Last." The title track asks the question, "Now that I've found peace at last, tell me Jesus, will it last? Now that I've found peace of mind, tell me Jesus, is it mine?" I've begun to believe that the answer might be "Yes." As Habakkuk puts it, "Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in Yahweh, I will be joyful in God my savior": if he does give me the gift.

On one of the occasions when I was in between joys, I was out running and feeling that nevertheless things were quite good with the world really and in that sense I was quite happy, but I told myself that this did not count as joy in the Lord. It was just natural light-heartedness, of which I have quite a lot interwoven with a capacity for being morose. Then in the first week of term, we had a meditation in chapel about the story of the woman anointing Jesus' feet, which provoked a Pharisee to query whether she had any business to be making an offering to Jesus.

We were asked who were the people who found fault with our offering; and I knew that the only person who found fault with my offering was me. I did not think I had anything worth offering. I knew that this was daft and that although I did not believe in my gift to Jesus, he believed in it and rejoiced in it, and I did not know why I did not believe I had anything to offer Jesus which he would value, and neither at that moment did I know what my offering might be. Only a bit later did I realize that my natural light-heartedness might be part of it. It did not constitute joy, but if I gave it to God, it was transformed into joy, it became a rejoicing in the Lord of the kind that that Philippians 4 speaks of, and it was an offering Jesus was happy to receive and consecrate. In general, I believe that spiritual gifts and fruits are natural capacities released and brought out and brought to fulfillment and utilized to glorify Christ by the Spirit, and this was just one example.

Joy and Pain

Then there was an occasion when I was running around the field feeling joyful at 7.45. It was the day I was due to take Ann to the rehabilitation center for a stay. It was a scheduled stay, not one related to a problem, though one did manage to emerge. Yet as I was putting her into the car I found myself crying, and I knew it was because this sort of moment brings home to me the reality of her illness. Whereas we try to live a "normal" life, a moment like that reminds me of the sadness of how things actually are. That did not surprise me. What did surprise me was that juxtaposition of joy and tears. It should not have surprised me, because that is how our life is, and how most human life is I suspect. Quite often it is joy alternating with sadness. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning (Psalm 30.5).

Some of us feel uncomfortable with the one, some with the other, some with either. Even if our own individual lives seem to be one or the other, in the lives of people near us there is bound to be the one we have not got. And maybe we then feel bad about the one we have got, whether it is sadness or joy, or find it hard to handle the fact that the other person has the opposite. God calls us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, which might among other things mean that we are able to hold together both in ourselves, or at least to let them alternate, not to be unrealistically stuck in one or the other.

When I realized that I did not believe that anything I could give Jesus was worthwhile, that he could be enthusiastic about anything I brought, I knew that there was something more adrift than merely not being able to recognize the value of a particular gift. Behind that was a more general uncertainty about me and God. I find it easy to identify with the other woman who only wanted to touch the edge of Jesus' coat to access the healing power, and then to hide so as not to cause too much trouble. God did once convince me of love and welcome for me, but I had evidently lost that for a time. One morning when I was not especially thinking about this but was just having a quiet time, I was suddenly overwhelmed by joy as God pointed me to something in me and in effect said "Do not you see how I rejoice at *that*, at the way you give yourself to me in *that*," looking at me in love because I was doing my best in my feebleness, and I found myself in tears and in joy at the same time.

Joy is often like that. It involves tears because it brings out into the open your deepest fears, the anxieties you most hide from, which it can do because it is confronting them and demonstrating that they are unfounded, and therefore that you can laugh and weep at the same time. You rejoice when things are tough, and you weep when things are great. The two are interwoven. When people returning from Babylon began to restore the temple, "No-one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping" (Ezra 3:13) because they felt both sadness and joy. That was true in the community. It is often true for the individual. They do not just alternate. They are there at the same time.

Many things we achieve are achieved only through struggle and conflict, not in easy ways. They always seem to involve crosses. I have so longed to find somewhere in life some corner where joy is unmingled with pain. But I never find it. Wherever I find joy, my own or other people's, and I do, it always seems to be mingled with pain. I still hanker after there being that corner of reality somewhere where there is joy that is unrelated to pain, some other universe where that is true, some charismatic experience that is simply joy. I hanker after escaping into it. But I cannot locate it. And I find that the people I most respect are people who know the link between joy and pain. And I know that God has given me moments of great joy and praise in him, but they have always been related to pain and hurt and loss, my own or other people's. And I have found that if we will own pain and weep over it together, we also find that Christ is overflowing comfort. The bad news is that there may be no corner of reality where joy is not related to pain. The good news is that there is no corner of reality where pain cannot be transformed into overflowing joy.

Joy and Love

There was another penny that dropped (another light that went on, in U.S.A.-speak) for me at about the same time. It was to do with the sequence in Galatians 5. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace.... It suggests that joy flows from love. You might have thought that it flowed from being loved, and of course that is true. Galatians opens up the other possibility, that joy flows from loving, from giving love.

God does not ask us to love everyone. There is not enough of us. God does ask us to love a few people. You can give lots of yourself to one or two or three people. You can pour out yourself for them, like the woman with her bottle of perfume. The word "joy" does not come in that story, but the story does indicate that because she poured herself out in love, she found forgiveness and salvation and peace, which are not unrelated to joy. Of course she did not earn her forgiveness or her salvation that way. She was already responding to the way Jesus had reached out to people and to what she knew was for her too. But it all became actual for her, the forgiveness and the salvation and the

peace and the joy, because she gave the most precious thing she had in love. And not because that was her motivation, because then it would not have worked. She did it because she loved.

In John 15 Jesus talks about love and joy, and in five verses he uses the word love eight times, and in the middle of them he says “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” His joy came from his loving, and so would theirs.

One Monday morning when Ann was going down with a bug, though I did not know that this was what was happening (but I thought that something was happening), I woke up and found myself saying to God, “I do not trust you with Ann.” Then before I could get struck by lightning I said “Well, in some ultimate sense I do trust you. I know it will be all right at the End. The problem is what you might let happen in the meantime.” I have to let the trust that can hold for the End hold for the meantime. In other words, the fact that the Lord is at hand means that I can have a kind of anticipatory joy in the present when it is not the End.

In Philippians 4 it is not clear what Paul means by the Lord being at hand and that being a reason for rejoicing. It is not clear what is the link between the successive clauses in what he says. The Church of England reads this passage in Advent, which invites us to assume, plausibly, that Christ’s second coming is a reason for joy in the “now.” Jesus is at hand. He is going to finish the job he has begun, a job of putting down evil and restoring rightness. Both may have been begun. Neither are finished. The Bible assumes that both will be reason for great joy when they are achieved, and that means we have reason for anticipatory joy now. I can trust God with Ann because I know God will finish.

Incidentally I knew that God was saying back to me, “If you were me would you trust *you* with Ann?” and that the answer was “No,” but that God is committed to the risk business, knowing an inner commitment on the part of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to complete what is begun and fulfill the plan. The Second Coming is important to God, too. God’s purpose is on the line. So rejoice, because the Lord is at hand.

12 Life

Death

I have mentioned the occasion when late one night on holiday in the Alps after a lovely day out and a lovely meal, two friends and I were discussing death. I suppose originally we must have been discussing something else, though I cannot remember what, but we somehow came to be discussing death, and two of us agreed that it was really quite an attractive prospect. It would be a relief. The third thought this was just bizarre.

For me, it was something to do with being tired. The wonderful things about this holiday was that it became two weeks in which responsibilities were shed and burdens were shared and furrows fell away from brows, and by the end I may not have felt the same about the attractiveness of death; I cannot remember. I do remember that it was hard to pick up the burdens and responsibilities again after the holiday.

Death is entirely natural. There is a natural sequence that takes us from conception and birth through growth to maturity through senescence to death and nothingness. It is not frightening or sad or incomplete. It is like a novel or a play with a beginning, a middle and an end.

So what happens when we die? We do not cease to exist: you can see the person there, lying on a bed or somewhere. To be more dramatic, imagine it is a teenager who was full of life a moment ago but lost control of their car on a bend and now they are still

there, they still exist, but they are lifeless. They cannot move. They cannot do anything. As the Bible sees it, what happens to our spirit is the same as what happens to our body. Our personality still exists as our body still exists, but our personality becomes lifeless, energy-less, as our body does.

If we are lucky (in the old days, at least), people then open the family tomb and we will be “laid to rest” with our family, with spouse or parents or grandparents. That was the plan for Princess Diana, though in the event they changed their mind because they thought this tomb at the church would be too accessible to “pilgrims.” If we are buried in a family tomb, it is not lonely there, we are not on our own. But it is dark and lifeless. We are only on the edge of the church now: we cannot join in its worship as we once did. The other week I had to preach in a distinctive parish church in the middle of a field, without a house in sight (apparently it had been built next to the manor house, but that had long since fallen down; I suppose it is something that the church has long outlasted it). I had to sit in a seat at the southeastern corner, next to the tomb of Lady Newdigate, Countess of Derby, which had a sculpture of her recumbent form lying on the top (I think there’s a word for that, but I have forgotten what it is: it is like the tombs you see in old cathedrals). Two cherubic figures are praying in a space underneath her feet. Because she was a Lady she got buried within reach of the Communion Table, but even she could not reach out and receive the bread and wine along with the ordinary people who could do so because the one thing they had over her was that they were alive. She was present for the worship, but she could not join in. This is one of death’s great deprivations, as the Bible sees it. There is no joy and laughter in the grave. We join those other lifeless personalities, and gradually we decompose and virtually cease to exist. (Of course modern death and cremation obscure much of that.)

Yet I love the poignant exposition of what death means in Ecclesiastes 9. The trouble is it brings out the downside to death, the way it makes you re-evaluate the significance of life. Death is the great denial, the great nothingness. Death is the place where there is no hope (verse 1). In life you can keep hoping against hope, keep kidding yourself that there might be a change, keep praying. Where there is life, there is hope. Death is the great realism. There is not going to be healing. There is not going to be reconciliation. There is not going to be conversion. There is no hope. So even a living dog is better off than a dead lion.

Death is the place where there is no knowledge (verse 5). The living know that they will die; I am mortal, therefore I am. The dead know nothing.

And the dead are not known. Death is the place where people are forgotten (verse 5). Yes, there are exceptions. Plato and Aristotle are remembered, Amos and Jeremiah, Caesar and Brutus. But not the ordinary people who wrote out Plato and Aristotle’s works and therefore made them available to us, not Amos’s wife and Jeremiah’s mother, not the people who cooked lunch for Caesar and Brutus, not the people like you and me. They say that one of the reasons why people long to have children, or at least why they regret not having them, is that children mean your name lives on, you live on. I discovered that a John Goldingay married an Ann Goldingay in Birmingham, where I come from, in 1842, exactly a hundred years before I myself was born, and now I have written about them they are not forgotten, but countless thousands of named and unnamed are forgotten.

Death is the place where people have no feelings (verse 6): “their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished.” Think of the massive, dynamic strength and significance of our loves, our hatreds, and our jealousies, our wants, our passions, our fury. They make us human. In death there will be none of them.

Death is the place where people can do nothing (verse 6). Here one way or another we gain our significance from being able to take part in things, to contribute to

discussions and arguments and decision-making. There: none of it. "In Sheol, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom" (verse 10).

And death is unpredictable (verse 12). "No one knows when their hour will come: as fish are caught in a cruel net, or birds are taken in a snare, so people are trapped by bad times that fall unexpectedly upon them."

People sometimes talk as if this is merely "the Old Testament understanding of death," by which they mean "the Old Testament's (pardonable) misunderstanding," now corrected by "the (true) New Testament understanding." But this Old Testament understanding is right. One look in the tomb establishes it. The Christian instinctively says "but that's just the body"; the soul, the real person is safe with God. And that is half-true, but it is not enough. The body is as much the real person as the soul, and if those things are true about the body, then they are true about the person. When resurrection comes, they will not be true, but for the time being, they are.

But I could relish all that. No more hoping (and therefore no more disappointment). No more knowing (and therefore no more knowing the tough things). No more memory (so I can forget). No more feelings (and therefore no more worry about whether I am loved). No more doing (and therefore no more responsibility). Like endless Sunday.

But Ecclesiastes sees the negative side. All that is true of everyone indiscriminately. "All share a common destiny, the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not." So what was the point of being righteous, good, clean, worshipful?

There was a great deal of point, actually. They were worthwhile in their own right. Death does not stop them being so. But it does underline a problem. What if that sequence of birth-growth-maturity-senescence-death does not work out in that neat way? I used to say that I would not be bothered if the great revisionist theologian Rudolf Bultmann was right and the idea of our being raised from the dead to new life in heaven were a myth. This would be okay. I would have enjoyed my life, it would have had its own plot, its own beginning, middle, and end, and I would be happy enough to bow out when the curtain dropped. And for myself that is still to some extent true. Only to some extent, admittedly. I am more aware now of the force of Jesus' argument in Mark 12.18-27 where he grounds the necessity of resurrection in the fact that God is the God of the living, not of the dead, one of whose implications is that when God enters into a relationship with people such as Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, or you or me, that is not likely to turn out to be a mere temporary affair. God does not give up on relationships like that.

But Ecclesiastes reminds me of another reason why I became less easy-going over Bultmann's view. It is one of the reasons for the development of belief in resurrection within Judaism. It is that otherwise things are so unfair. In the context of contemporary discussion of the holocaust and its implications for Jewish faith, Dan Cohn-Sherbock has argued in his book *Holocaust Theology* (Marshall, 1989) that belief in a resurrection is essential to making sense of the fact of the holocaust, and in so arguing he is repeating the logic that drove many Jewish people to this belief two millennia ago, beginning with the visions in Daniel. In my case believing that resurrection is important links with Ann in particular. It is important to me that, though confined to a wheelchair now, she will dance in heaven. I respect Ecclesiastes for living a tough faith without that conviction; Jews in his day had no empirical evidence for it, and would not have such evidence until Jesus rose from the dead. I am glad I live the other side of that resurrection, even though believing in Ann's and mine is still a matter of faith.

There is another aspect to the way we experience death. In one sense, in theory, there is a clear distinction between life and death.

The first person I watched die was Ann's mother. It was itself both bizarre and providential. As she grew older and passed into her eighties, we had wondered how the end might eventually come, and had wondered how we might cope with increasing frailness as she lived two hours' drive away and Ann is herself disabled. She came to stay with us one Christmas as usual and we went to see the film *When Harry Met Sally*. Half way through, to my annoyance, she felt sick and we had to leave the cinema and go home. Eventually it became clear that she had had a heart attack. At first she seemed to improve, but on New Year's Day in the afternoon the hospital rang to suggest that we came in. By the time we reached her bedside she was unconscious and we sat there for some time - I cannot now remember how long. She was breathing quite loudly, almost snoring. Then I remember a moment when she simply stopped. And I remember thinking "That's it." That was life; this is death.

Yet in another sense life and death overlap and interweave. We talk about feeling deathly. We get flu and lie in bed not moving or speaking or eating for a day or two and not wishing to talk to anyone thank you very much and it is like a little death. We are for a while overwhelmed by fears or depressions or responsibilities or guilts or hatreds and it is like having the soil fall onto the coffin as you lie there in it in the newly-dug grave. It is as if death has got hold of us while we are still alive. And this is how the Bible sees it. Many of the Psalms speak of being in Sheol, that corporate grave which is the non-material equivalent to the material tomb, or speak of having been rescued from Sheol when people were delivered from illness or depression or danger. They speak of being overwhelmed by floods, which are the waters of death. Life and death interweave, all right. It reminds me of the lines in T. S. Eliot's poem *Journey of the Magi* in which he has one of the Wise Men wondering about the link between birth and death, and realizing that being involved with Christ's birth had taken them through a kind of death, because things that previously suggested life had now died on them. "I should be glad of another death," he comments. Is life attractive, or is death attractive?

Life

But what difference does it make that Jesus came back from death to begin a transformed life? Here are three or four things which happened when we visited California in connection with the possibility of moving there.

Just beforehand, in the furthest southwestern tip of that state, and thus of the whole United States, thirty-nine people committed suicide in San Diego in the conviction that the Hale-Bopp comet which was then circling the earth harbingered God's coming to take them to be with him. One reaction to that is to feel astonishment that people should reckon anything so certain that it was worth dying for. Yet in that respect it recalls people in the early Christian church seeking martyrdom. From a Christian angle what is odd is not the fact of the certainty but the lack of a basis for it. The fact of the certainty might make us ask how convinced we ourselves are about matters of life and death. A person who had left the cult told the newspapers, "We were seekers of what was going on, why were we here, what's the purpose of life." These people were not crazy Californians, except by adoption. They were people from Ohio and Connecticut who had gone to California from elsewhere on a spiritual pilgrimage, as the ancestors of the California-born had once done, in what the newspaper called "the great American temptation." It was a continuation of what brought people to "the New World" in the first place. But the east coast turned out not to be enough, and the trail led ever westward until it reached the point where there is nowhere else to go until you get to Australasia, and so they looked for life another way and found death.

At about the same time Southern California gave the Oscars to the film *The English Patient*. It is the story of a man who has been horrifically injured in an accident in his aircraft in north Africa in the Second World War. He lies encased in bandages, unable to move. In due course an enemy catches up with him but declined to kill him because that would actually be an act of mercy. He is waiting to die. But in another sense, he says, "I dies ages ago." He is referring not merely to the near-death of his accident but to an event which preceded that, when he had lost the only woman he had loved. He had had to leave her, injured, in a cave in a desert mountain, in order to go to get help, and had been unable convince people that they should listen to him. But he had promised to return. In what I found to be a rather cold film, though a brilliant one, the point when I became emotionally engaged was when he eventually did return, and gathered his love's body and carried it round the mountain to where he had landed his plane, crying a scream that we see on his lips but do not hear, so that it all the more fills the cinema with its silence. That was when he died, ages ago. (I should add that I discovered this to be a male perspective on the film; not surprisingly, a woman with whom I discussed it found the emotionally-engaging moment was the one when the woman is left to die alone in the cave, as she tries to draw a final picture and her light becomes used up and darkness and cold descend.)

While we were in California we were shown round some houses by a realtor or estate agent. Now as a clergyman I have never bought a house before, and thus had little experience of estate agents. My impression of them is as people who would tell any lies in order to make a sale. Chris subverted that slanderous impression. She loved people and she loved property, and she seemed to gain her fulfillment from putting the right property and the right people in touch with each other so that they could then live happily ever after. I do not know whether Chris saw this as a vocation, but it provided me with a brilliant Christian understanding of this particular secular calling. No doubt this is also a more effective way to make money in the long run, and in a litigious society like the U.S.A. perhaps also a safer one.

The week we met her was the week after Easter and she happened to express her anger at the sermon she had heard on Easter Day, a sermon which was well-gearred to communicate to children and the television generation. It had taken up some C. S. Lewis story which perhaps expressed the gospel (indeed, as it was Lewis, no doubt it expressed the gospel), but for Chris it failed to focus clearly enough on the fact that Jesus was alive.

I was struck by the force of her feelings on this matter, and a bit puzzled by it. Next day while we were out looking at some more properties (though we had already found the right one!) I discovered the background. Eight years previously her eighteen-year-old son had gone off for a drive in the mountains that tower up from Pasadena, a little like the Alps or Upper Galilee, had failed to take a bend, and had plunged his car to the bottom of a ravine. This had happened at about the time when the faith in Christ was becoming a reality for Chris herself. Her son's death did not lead her to Christ, nor did it drive her away from Christ, but it did somehow come to constitute one of the key factors in determining what Christ meant for her. She did not quite articulate what this was, but I think it was something to do with things having meaning and life being livable-with. It was the fact that Christ rose to new life that somehow made it possible to live with the fact of her son's falling to the end of his life. It gave her hope. And that was why she was so concentratedly angry that her Easter sermon had not focused explicitly enough on the fact that Jesus was alive. Because that was what made life possible for her.

She makes me think again of the ending of Job's story, when Job gets re-established with his new life and his new family. I find that students do not like the story's ending; it is too neat and unrealistic, they feel, and they prefer the tough realism of the protesting Job. I admit that the ending does make me feel some further sympathy for

Ms Job; I wonder how she now felt, having by the end borne fourteen sons and six daughters.

But theologically and pastorally the story's coming to an end of that kind promises us that stories do have endings, that our story will have an ending. They do not finish with families decimated and lovers dead and lives broken and empty. The story of Job is realistic for theological reasons which are based in the nature of God but are given grounds by the resurrection of Jesus. Easter means that our stories will have an ending.

There was a fourth fact about Easter which came home to me that week. It is a solemn fact about ministry that it can often seem a deathly business. "We are hard-pressed ... perplexed ... persecuted ... struck down" in the course of our ministry, says Paul. "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus" (2 Corinthians 4.8-10). Yes, death is not something which waits till we die. Easter means we die with Christ, but it also means we live with Christ. I heard a sermon which drew attention to the fact that when Mary thought Jesus was the gardener, she was not wrong. He was not only the firstfruits of the dead, but the gardener producing fruit.

I was once told of someone who was said to have "slipped quietly into heaven." I'm going like a bat out of hell. More recently Patti Smith's album *Gone Again* commemorated her husband Fred "Sonic" Smith on his death. Patti was the "punk high priestess" whose band followed on the work of Andy Warhol and Velvet Underground. A profile in *The Guardian* newspaper reported how her Jehovah's Witness mother's teaching her to pray was "the greatest gift she could ever have given me. It was the idea that however bored you may be, you can still go to bed early and you can pray." Now "pitched between bearing witness to a living God and proclaiming her violent apostasy, Smith's records and performances can be seen as a struggle with the faith she'd learned as a child – an acting out of the "expansive territory" between her Christian mother and her doubting father." Her first album began with the line "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine." _

13 Love

You are to love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18).

It is a rather ambiguous exhortation. In recent decades it has been understood to mean "You are to love your neighbor as you love yourself" and it has become a proof-text for the notion of "loving oneself" as a key to personal health. It is the only such proof-text as far as I know. I cannot think of other scriptures that explicitly encourage us to love ourselves or accept ourselves as we are, though I can think of a few that seem to suggest the opposite.

Now it might be hypothesized that the cultures of the Bible were healthier than ours, that the notion (or rather the reality) of accepting oneself could be taken for granted, and that being prepared to say "No" to yourself was therefore the point that had to be stressed. But I am generally wary of arguments that suggest that people in the Bible were different from us in the way they worked. In other connections it is important for us to assume that they worked in the same way as we do, and that assumption proves fruitful. It seems at least as likely that our preoccupation with ourselves needs to be confronted rather than accepted. The Bible's emphasis on giving your life away and getting it back as a result provides a different way into the issues involved in the notion of "loving oneself." Perhaps we will find more acceptance of ourselves and love for ourselves through giving ourselves away to others than we will find in actually focusing on loving ourselves in

order that we can work towards loving other people. That way we short-circuit the process. It is in any case uncertain whether “You are to love your neighbor as yourself” means what has been suggested. It is more likely to mean “you are to love your neighbor as a person like yourself” (so the New English Bible).

So what is love? The companion exhortation about loving God may give us clues. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength (Deuteronomy 6:5), with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37), with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). The variation reflects differences in the connotations of some of these words in different languages. We have noted in the chapter on Community that in Hebrew the “heart” denotes what we would call the workings of the mind rather than the emotions, for which you would more likely refer to lower parts of your anatomy (we too speak of a fluttering in the tummy). What each of these forms of expression is making clear (as we have noted in the chapter on Friendship) is that love for God requires the whole person, the mind, the feelings, and the will, with all their energy. It is a reaching out and committing oneself on the part of the whole person.

Loving another human being is the same. It too involves reaching out in commitment to someone else, reaching out with affection and consideration, reaching out by thinking of them and seeking to understand them and thinking the best of them, reaching out by spending time and money and energy and life. It involves the whole person given to someone else. That is how God’s love for us is: it involves God’s thinking and affection and acting. God thinks the best of us, wants to understand us and likes to hear us talk in order to develop that process. God feels warm about us, smiles at us and laughs at us with the laugh of the lover whose smile is an expression of affection, not the laugh of the scorner whose smile implies superiority or disdain. God gives everything for us, even the only son God had.

Another Painful Business

Love is thus a demanding business, even a painful business. The feeling in the pit of the stomach is as likely to be an anxious pain as an excited flutter. That is true of romantic love, but also of other forms of love. The point is well expressed in Hannah Hurnard’s allegory of love, *Hinds’ Feet on High Places* (CMJ, 1955). The hero, Much-Afraid, shrinks back from having the seed of Love planted in her heart. “I am afraid.... I have been told that if you really love someone you give that loved one the power to hurt and pain you in a way nothing else can.” The Shepherd’s response is to affirm the truth of that, but to add that there is happiness in love even if you are not loved in return. Yet he promised that when Love was ready to bloom in her heart and when she was ready to change her name, she would in fact be loved in return. And he offered her the seed of Love.

She bent forward to look, then gave a startled little cry and drew back. There was indeed a seed... but it was shaped exactly like a long, sharply pointed thorn. Much-Afraid had often noticed that the Shepherd’s hands were scarred and wounded, but now she saw that the scar in the palm of the hand held out to her was the exact shape and size of the seed of Love lying beside it.

The Shepherd reminded her that “Love and Pain go together, for a time at least. If you would know Love, you must know pain too” (pp. 16-17).

It is not a uniquely Christian insight. Richard Olivier comments in *Shadow of the Stone Heart*, to which I referred in the chapter on Identity, “I was learning the hard way you can’t just increase the capacity to love without simultaneously increasing the

propensity for pain” (p. 160). But he was determined that he would no longer sacrifice the feelings of love and joy because they involved owning the feelings of pain and loss; “As someone once said, ‘It is important that when Death finds you, it finds you alive’” (p. 182).

It is easy for love to be self-centered, to be at least as much interested in the love we get in return for giving love as in the mere giving of the love itself (we are back to the Adversary’s question in Job). Real love gains its happiness from the giving, not the anticipated or actual reciprocating. It is a little like artistic creativity. The painter or sculptor or musician may not care whether anyone appreciates their work; that is not the point. The point is to have created something true.

So it is with love. Its point is to have done something true, even if the object of love makes no response, even can make no response. (Of course we know that there is a response of love from God, whose heart thrills with delight and loves us so much because we have loved.)

In due course Much-Afraid reaches an exalted place, dominated by a mighty waterfall, whose waters leap down from a height high above her and her two companions Sorrow and Suffering. The Shepherd asks Much-Afraid:

“What do you think of this fall of great waters in their abandonment of self-giving?” She trembled a little as she answered, “I think they are beautiful and terrible beyond anything which I ever saw before.” “Why terrible?” he asked. “It is the leap which they have to make, the awful height from which they must cast themselves down to the depths beneath, there to be broken on the rocks. I can hardly bear to watch it.” “Look closer,” he said again. “Let your eye follow just one part of the water from the moment when it leaps over the edge until it reaches the bottom.” Much-Afraid did so, and then almost gasped with wonder. Once over the edge, the waters were like winged things, alive with joy, so utterly abandoned to the ecstasy of giving themselves that she could almost have supposed that she was looking at a host of angels floating down on rainbow wings, singing with rapture as they went. She gazed and gazed, then said, “It looks as though they think it is the loveliest moment in all the world, as though to cast oneself down is to abandon oneself to ecstasy and joy indescribable.”... The lower the water fell, the lighter it seemed to grow, as though it really were lighting down on wings. On reaching the rocks below, all the waters flowed together in a glorious host, forming an exuberant, rushing torrent which swirled triumphantly around and over the rocks. Laughing and shouting at the top of their voices, they hurried still lower and lower, down through the meadows to the next precipice and the next glorious crisis of their self-giving. (pp. 115-6)

Nothing Love Cannot Face

“There is nothing love cannot face. There is no limit to its faith, its hope, and its endurance,” the New English Bible’s version of 1 Corinthians 13:7 goes on. It is tempting to think that there are many things that love cannot face. When you have done something wrong by someone you love, you may naturally and rightly fear telling them. You are not sure their love can face it. We once knew a woman who had had an abortion some years ago. She had never told any of the friends she had made since she had come to faith in Christ, because she feared that this would destroy their picture of her (or their love for her) as the joyful dedicated Christian she is.

God’s love can face things. I was tempted to suggest that this was just as well, because God has difficulty avoiding knowing things, but then I recalled that God has more

control of remembering and forgetting than we do, so presumably God can avoid knowing things (even though we cannot avoid God knowing things if God chooses to). But if our relationship with God were based on God not knowing some things about us, that would also imperil the relationship. It would make it unreal. The more committed a relationship is, the more important it seems that we should be able to say anything in its context, and in particular that we should be able to share the shameful things. Otherwise, apparent depth in the relationship turns out to be based on falsehood. If there is real love in the relationship, we need to be able to take the initiative and share shameful things, and then (perhaps) have the experience of these things not seeming anywhere near as shameful to the other person as they seem to us, or the experience of having them say that they had guessed that there was something like this in the background anyway, and that it does not matter. God is like that; God's love can face things. Worthwhile love on the part of other human beings is like that too; their love can face things. And for us to love involves being instinctively like that ourselves. We can face things in other people, and thereby bring them a new form of freedom as they can bring shameful things out of the cupboard and find that in the daylight of love they pale into insignificance.

There is no limit to love's faith, to its capacity to believe in the other person. God demonstrated an extraordinary faith in Israel and in what it could be and achieve, like the belief a mother has in her children or a wife has in her husband. Indeed, both the analogy of parenthood and that of marriage appear in Israel's story. Then Jesus tells eleven members of Israel that he is entrusting them with the task of discipling all the nations. There is a midrash which has Jesus announcing this plan to the angels ahead of time. One of them asks what is his plan if this one fails. "I have no other plan," he says. That is the degree of his faith in them, his trust in them. Our love for each other involves a similar trust, a belief in the other person that may make it possible for them to do things they could not otherwise do because they do not believe in themselves as much as we do.

That overlaps with the significance of the fact that there is no limit to love's hope. God had a vision for Israel, the way a mother has a vision for her children. The story in Hosea 11 draws painful attention to the way a mother's vision may be long unfulfilled, but it is not abandoned. God has a vision for us, and is not yet finished with us. That is a powerful stimulus to change for us. And we have a vision for people we love. It is an old joke that when a woman marries a man, she is convinced that she will change him. But there is a difference between having a vision of what we wish another person to be and having a vision of what they could be, a vision that sees the realization of potentials we can perhaps see in them. We may be able to hope for them what they could not hope for themselves. There is no limit to love's hope.

And there is no limit to its endurance. Again, we can see this is so as we consider the story of God's relationship with Israel, or with the church. And again the comparison with a mother is an instructive one. The picture in Hosea 11 presupposes that a mother's endurance is never exhausted. My Old Testament colleague who is a mother talks about the fact that no matter what her sons do, no matter how exasperated or angry with them she might become, she could never cease being their mother. She in one sense looks forward to the time when they will grow up and leave home to live their lives as adults, but she could never throw them out because they had finally crossed some line. There is no limit to the endurance of a mother's love. Perhaps women are better at facing and trusting and hoping and enduring. Our love for each other will persist.

As the time of our departure from England drew near, I went to a farewell lunch with some of our students. Towards the end one of them delivered a touching speech. "You have too big a love for St John's College," he said, "and I am afraid that your love will be too big for Fuller Seminary." I did not know what he meant, but it sounded a very nice thing to say, and I wanted to think about it and wonder whether it was some form of

word from God. Then I realized that actually he had said, “You have too big a laugh for St John’s College, and I am afraid your laugh will be too big for Fuller Seminary.”

But the notions of a “big love” and of “too big a love” bear thinking about. It is a big love that can face anything and that has no end to its faith, its hope, and its endurance. And too big a love overflows and spills out to others. It makes a love-relationship something open and overflowing, not a closed “*egoïsme de deux*” (a piece of selfishness on the part of two people).

Doomed Love

For his book on religion and rock, Steve Turner took his title from Bruce Springsteen’s song “Hungry For Heaven.” Turner’s thesis is that the restlessness expressed in rock music and usually focused on human relationships is the same restlessness that Augustine speaks of, one which reaches out further than it realizes. The live version of “Hungry Heart” on Springsteen’s retrospective compilation of live performances shows why music is a live business: he leaves the audience quite alone to do the singing at the beginning. (A gig is somewhat like church: people know why they are there, it is a communal event, they know the words, and they don’t need to be told the page number.)

Springsteen sings the story of someone who has kept seeking the fulfillment of his heart’s longing and in the course of doing that has gone in for a few betrayals but never finds a place to rest, a home. “Everybody’s got a hungry heart.”

As happened with “Many Rivers to Cross,” I was once struck by a few lines of a track on Jeff Buckley’s album *Grace*, which also made me try to grasp the whole. It shattered me when I did. This time it is the story of a Bible character, David, a man with much more ambiguity in his life than the plaster-saint portrayals usually allow. In the song David is the baffled king, singing hallelujah but no longer understanding God, beguiled by a woman and letting her break his throne in return for the joy she brought him, proving that love is “a cold and... a broken hallelujah.”

The lines simultaneously and devastatingly question the reality of human relationships and of relationships with God (as well as the significance of music) and thus bring out into the open the secret dreads and doubts about God and other loves that we dare not name even to ourselves. And the fact that they do this to both at the same time means we can neither escape from the doubted God to a human love nor escape from a doubted human love to God.

The song is by Leonard Cohen, the Canadian Jewish writer and composer who often takes up religious themes in such a way, though nowhere else as disturbingly, I would say. Jennifer Warnes, who was once a backing singer for Cohen and has herself recorded an album of his songs, said of Cohen that the great thing about him was that he said the things that no one else would say. At the hands of Leonard Cohen, the implicit reaching out of “Hungry Heart” deconstructs.

In spring 1997 Jeff Buckley, who had made the definitive recording of this song, walked into the Mississippi and drowned, dragged into an undertow by a riverboat. First accounts said he was playing his guitar, which seemed bizarre. A later version reported more plausibly that as he went in for a swim he was singing to Led Zeppelin’s “Whole Lotta Love” as it played on a ghetto-blaster. He was just past the age when his singer father, Tim Buckley, whom he never met, died of drugs.

I have suggested that Meat Loaf’s “Bat Out Of Hell” (itself a love song) illustrates how Jim Steinman’s songs and arrangements are written as if for fun, but deceive you because they often conceal a sting or a sadness in the tale/tail. On that album, my next favorite to “Bat Out of Hell” is “Two Out of Three Ain’t Bad”: “I need you, I want you,

but there ain't no way I'm ever going to love you." It sounds stereotypically male. But then as you listen to the song it turns out that he cannot let himself love because of his experience of being broken by the woman who he thought loved him and who said those words to him. Which is the stereotypical male theme dominating rock, really.

My favorite film of 1995 was *Leaving Las Vegas*, the story of an alcoholic writer who goes to Las Vegas to drink himself to death. There he meets a prostitute and they fall in love. It means that he dies loved, while she goes into the rest of her life having loved. Someone who came to see it with Ann and me was puzzled as to why a Christian wanted to see such a gloomy film. For me it was an encouraging film because it looked the grimmest of experiences in the eye and declared that if there was love, it was possible to die and it was also possible to live on (better to have loved and lost...).

About the same time, we went to see *Sense and Sensibility*, towards which I have a certain antipathy. The story involves the threat that two women would lose the men they loved. Twenty minutes before the end I thought and hoped it was going to turn out like that, with the two sisters then proving that it was possible to live on with each other's sisterly friendship. But in those last few minutes everything got sorted out and the sisters were able to marry happily.

We were discussing the two films with friends and I was saying how much I preferred *Leaving Las Vegas*. One of the friends who knew me too well commented, "Yes, you would go for doomed romance." I protested that it was romanced doom that I went for (that is, gloom tempered by romance), but later I realized that the comment was right. I like the idea suggested by *Leaving Las Vegas* that even if love is doomed and one has to live on anyway, this can be possible. But I can only believe this because God is real and Leonard Cohen's awful vision can therefore be looked in the face but not seen as the final word.

14 Realism

Facing the Facts as an Individual

Jesus once told an extraordinary story about a farm manager. The farm owner had given him a formal warning about being dissatisfied with his work performance. This galvanized him into action that rather shows he need never have got into this mess. He summoned the owner's creditors and told them that if they paid now, he would settle for half the amount they owed. At least that would mean he had "friends" when he lost his job. When the owner discovered what had happened, he was unable to conceal his admiration for the manager's shrewdness.

There is a British organization called the Scripture Union which among other things publishes notes to help people understand the Bible. The organization has a logo consisting of an oil lamp, recalling the verse in the Psalms that describes God's word as a lamp to illuminate the way for us. Years ago I heard someone suggest that if the logo was ever redesigned it ought to be changed into a pair of raised eyebrows, because the Bible is always saying things that surprise us. It is never predictable or boring. The parables are best of all at such surprises. In another parable a widow makes a terrible nuisance of herself at the private residence of a judge, who eventually sees that justice is done simply because this is the only way he can get the wretched woman off his back. And *that* is an example of prayer. Then there is the one about the Publican and the Pharisee going to church. Think of the Publican as an embodiment of the Thatcherite enterprise economy; think of the Pharisee, the committed churchman, concerned to see the scriptures embodied in his own life and other people's. Think of him as a seminary principal, perhaps. Who goes home right with God? Not the seminary principal. Or what about the man who gets

mugged on the way to Jericho, and ignored by another principal, and by a hospital chaplain, but gets cared for by – well, who is the equivalent to a Samaritan? A Mullah preaching death to Israel?

Why are Jesus' parables so extraordinary, so eyebrow-raising? There are various reasons, but what lies behind them is the fact that the gospel that Jesus is and that he brings is so important but so extraordinary that it needs eyebrow-raising stories to convey it; it needs shock tactics to get it taken seriously. Jesus told the story of the shrewd manager to try to shake people out of torpor into action.

The reason was that Jesus put people into a position in which key decisions had to be taken. He knew he came from God. His coming meant that the crucial moment in his people's history was dawning; indeed, the crucial moment in world history was dawning. He had come to bring new life to Israel, and new life to the world. What attitude people took to Jesus would make a decisive difference to their whole destiny. The question was, could they recognize that the decisive moment had arrived, that their number was up?

There are moments like that for governments. Indeed, there are quite close parallels between party politics and the shrewd manager: does not his story also remind you of some chancellor of the exchequer distributing largesse on the eve of an election, in the conviction that that is the way to buy re-election from the voters?

There are also moments like that in our personal lives. It is one of the themes in the film "Dead Poets Society," a marvelous if rather pagan story about young men discovering who they were, and becoming willing to be different and not to conform to the expectations of parents and other despised species. One of them accidentally meets the girl of his dreams and in order to woo her has to take action that is dangerously and amusingly bold, given that she is already nearly engaged to a large football-playing gentleman. Another throws himself into acting despite his father's insistence that the boy is destined to be a doctor. They cannot let life simply wash over them, if they are to become someone, and to do what they have to do. They have to take decisions, to take action.

Just after our parable Luke tells us of some words of Jesus that comprise a challenge to a decision. "No-one can serve two masters" (Luke 16:13). You have to choose between God and Mammon. I am about to move to a post that pays twice as much as my present one. What will serving Christ mean now? How will I live with money and God? How does one use worldly wealth in a way which brings us nearer an eternal home (Luke 16:9)? Many people no doubt wish that was their problem, instead of the problem of making ends meet. But all of us have to face a decision regarding God or Mammon, a broad gate or a narrow one through which we need to walk if we are to join the few who find life. It does not happen accidentally. It does not happen if you simply drift. That, says Jesus, is the broad way that leads nowhere or worse.

Jesus did not just bring a crisis and a challenge to a decision to first-century people, scribes and fishermen and zealots and whores and priests and tax-collectors and other characters quite unlike us. He was the decisive person in *world* history, and he still is. "Don't be so stupid that you fail to recognize a decisive moment when it arrives," says Jesus.

Facing the Facts as a Community

The date is 17 October, the year 520 BC. It is the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles, Israel's great festival at the end of the farming year in the autumn, one of the occasions when people came to Jerusalem on pilgrimage. The occasion was a cross between Christmas or Easter and Spring Harvest or Keswick or Greenbelt. People

camped together for a week and looked back over what God had done for them and wondered what the new year would bring.

There is a special significance about this particular year in the history of the people of God, and God sends Haggai to them with a special message, recorded in Haggai 2:1-9. Like a typical prophet Haggai points the people to some facts about past, present, and future in order to bring them promises and challenges.

He wants them to face the real facts about the past. At the Feast of Tabernacles they might be able to avoid facing these facts. It almost encouraged them to do that. After all, the festival was designed to remind them of the wonder of God's deliverance of them from Egypt, when they had to camp on the way. If they were having a great celebration of God's acts they might be averting their eyes from the realities of the more recent past. On the other hand, it might be that the reminder of those acts of God would mean they could hardly avoid the contrast between the exodus story and their own more recent past and present.

Haggai gently draws attention to the contrast between past and present and invites them to own it. He reminds them of the fact that their days of glory lie in the past. There was once a day when Davidic kings ruled in Jerusalem. They had real kings then. All they have now is Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel. His genealogy marks him as a person who could be king if there was a king, but all he actually is a "governor" appointed by the Persians.

There was once a day when they had quality high priests, people whose position no-one would query. All they have now is Joshua the son of Jehozadak, and we know from Zechariah 3 that he was disparaged (by members of the local population who had not been into exile?) as being tainted by the impurity of exile.

There was once a day when they were a real people, an entity to be reckoned with in Middle-Eastern politics and history. All they are now is a "remnant." We know what a remnant is; it is the left-over bits of wallpaper or material that a shop sells off cheaply.

Haggai particularly notes that they had a real temple then, one that puts to shame the temple the community was trying to build. This new temple is really less than nothing. Its shape is the same (the First Temple was not demolished), but it has lost the covenant chest and the covenant stones, the cherubim, the pot of manna, Aaron's rod, the urim and thummim, the imported wooden paneling, the gold.... People who were old enough to have known the First Temple (they would have had to be over 70) wept when they saw the Second (see Ezra 3: Ezra 1 – 6 tells the story that is the context for the work of Haggai and Zechariah).

Facing facts is difficult. That is true about individuals: doctors and relatives find it hard to tell someone they have a terminal disease. It is true about the nation: a country such as Britain finds it difficult to come to terms with its reduced significance in the world. It is true about the church: it is tempting to hide from the church is decline. How can you face facts?

Haggai believes that the key is to consider the invisible facts about the present. In his first prophecy he was rather confrontational in rebuking them about their commitment to God. Here he wants to be encouraging. The invisible facts about the present are what makes it possible to face the real facts about the past.

"I am with you: be strong, says Yahweh Armies." That phrase is Haggai's special title for God. English translations have "the LORD Almighty," which waters it down. The name expresses concretely and vividly the power of God, which is what the people need to believe in. They are merely "people of the land," ordinary people without great resources or status. God's nature as Yahweh Armies contrasts with theirs and opens up the possibility of facing those other facts.

“My spirit remains among you. Do not be afraid. Remember how it was when I brought you out of Egypt.” This theme will fit the Feast of Tabernacles. The exodus will be a bitter-sweet memory because of the contrast with present experience. Haggai offers them some alternative facts about the past to set against those about the present.

The hidden facts about God in the present provide a context in which we face facts about an individual’s illness or about a nation that has lost an empire and not found a role or about a church in decline. Hope lies not in doctrinal soundness or trendiness or social involvement or the latest charisms. Haggai’s encouragement is God. The resource of the church is God active in a hidden way building up the people of God as a temple of the Spirit.

As well as facing the alternative facts about the past and the hidden facts about the present Haggai wants them to look at the guaranteed facts about the future. Faith means being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see (Hebrews 11:1). “I will fill this house with glory,” God says. The recurrent word in Haggai’s vision of their future is “glory.” Glory suggests the outward visible splendor of a monarch in state robes. Glory is not the nature of their own recent or present experience.

For Israel it will mean “prosperity” (RSV) or “peace” (NIV): both aspects of the meaning of *shalom* are surely appropriate (REB). Yet what Haggai promises will come about for God’s glory not merely for Israel’s sake. All the world will come to worship at the throne of the king.

It will come about by God’s act. It was God who filled the temple with glory before, and it will be God who does so again. Human beings cannot make that happen, but God can do so. Hence it can be promised as coming “in a little while.” It is imminent because it is only dependent on God acting, on God’s shaking.

It will come about as part of a final reordering of all things. It will involve a great “shaking” like the shaking at the exodus and Sinai (cf. Hebrews 12:25-27). Zechariah, again, grieved at the fact that in his and Haggai’s day all seemed peace and quiet. He knew that when God acted there had to be upheaval. That was promise not threat.

As with very many promises and threats in scripture, the final reordering did not come in the prophet’s day, but something did, a kind of foretaste of the final fulfillment of God’s promise (see Ezra 6 regarding how things turned out). So it is often with healing and with peace among the nations and with renewal in the church. We have to ask for them as gifts that belong to the End. They will become full reality only in connection with the End. But then we have to look for the little foretastes that may be what we ourselves get in the meantime, and rejoice in these for what they are and for what they themselves promise.

The facts about the future are guaranteed by the word of Yahweh Armies, Almighty God (eight times in Haggai 2:6-9). When God speaks, things will happen.

Limitations

I expect some Israelites thought the same about Ecclesiastes as those students of mine whom I mentioned in chapter 2 thought about me and U2. I love Ecclesiastes. Well actually I love all the Old Testament. I have friends who belong to a British denomination called the “New Testament Church of God.” I always say I belong to the Old Testament Church of God. One of the things I love about it is the way it interacts with our human life as it is. And the book that does that most systematically is Ecclesiastes.

The name is Greek; it means “church member” or “church leader.” That corresponds to the book’s Hebrew name, Qohelet, which has the same meaning. The opening verse of the book thus describes what follows as the words of the “teacher” or “preacher.” It then identifies him as son of David and king in Jerusalem, which enhances

the book's authority, because it means this is a book of wisdom like the "Solomonic" Proverbs or the "Solomonic" Song of Songs."

After that it may be surprising to find that the opening words of this Solomonic wisdom are "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless!" It turns out that there is another significance in the opening verse putting us in mind of Solomon. Because Solomon was the man who had everything. So if there was ever a man who had the chance to find what he was looking for, it was Solomon.

Solomon stands for the use of the mind; but he acknowledges that the more he has discovered intellectually, the more grief he has felt. He has asked many questions, but not found many answers. Solomon stands for enjoyment, but his story shows that this turned to dust in his mouth. Solomon stands for achievement: he is the man who built the temple and made Jerusalem what it was. But that, too, has turned into dust in his mouth. It is meaningless. The word literally means a breath.

Christians are inclined to stand superior in relation to Ecclesiastes. It may seem to resemble the darkness into which the gospel in due course will shine more than the light of the gospel itself. Yet when we talk this way we may be hiding from the reality of how Christian life is. For Christians work at intellectual questions such as the meaning of suffering, and do not know the answer. Christians try to get to the top of the ladder in their profession, try to win architectural competitions and to get into the final at Wimbledon and to make a hit album and to get elected to parliament. And some succeed. And they then find that these achievements turn to dust in their mouths.

Indeed there is more. In a telling observation the Teacher describes how "God has made everything beautiful in its time, and has also set eternity in the human heart; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end" (3:11). That has not changed. And the problem is not merely intellectual. The Teacher has seen something else. Where there ought to be just judgment, actually there is wickedness.

"Solomon's" conclusion is then surprising. It is that a person can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. That comes from God. It is God's gift.

A portrait of God as the great giver is surprisingly central to the theology of Ecclesiastes. We feel a huge tension between the exposure of all pretension to understand or make sense of life, and the bold and stark invitation to hold faith in God the giver, but it sets before us a vision preferable to the alternatives. For what are the alternatives? To pretend the question is not there and that we can find meaning in fame or achievement or whatever? That is the usual non-Christian ploy. I prefer Ecclesiastes' invitation to realism and trust.

15 Remembering

When Moses about to give up the leadership of Israel, as the Old Testament tells the story, he preaches one last sermon. He has led them for a generation and they are now to pass on to a new stage of their life, and God has made it clear that this new stage and this seeing the fulfillment of God's vision is to happen under someone else. He can look on into the land where God's vision is taking them, he knows what it looks like, but he will not walk in it with them. He is about to undertake a new journey of his own, the first time for the best part of his grown-up life that he will be journeying with God apart from them, and the mountain he is about to climb has some surprises in store for him.

So on the eve of climbing his mountain, he preaches a sermon. It is a long one, this book Deuteronomy. I calculate that the actual sermon is about 25,000 words, which would take four hours to preach non-stop. When you preach your last sermon in

circumstances like Moses', what do you say? What did the Deuteronomists think Moses would have wanted people to remember? Here are four things from Deuteronomy 7:6-11.

That You Are Holy and That You Are Loved

First, remember that you are a holy people. As usual the word "holy" does not mean righteous and moral. It means special to God, different, awe-inspiring. You are a special, different, awe-inspiring people. It is a position belonging to Israel, which the church later comes to share in, without replacing Israel. "You are a people holy to Yahweh your God."

Being holy meant having nothing to do with the way the Canaanites were. After all, "Yahweh your God chose you out of all nations on earth to be his special possession," like the parts of Buckingham Palace that you do not see when you go on the tour. Israel was to be different. Israel never took any notice of this expectation, and we do not want to be different either. Forty years ago we were different: we did not go to the pub or the cinema or go dancing, for instance, or if we did, we knew we were breaking taboos. Now we are all indistinguishable from the world, and it is not obviously a step forward. And yet I do not really want people to start looking different in that kind of way.

So how should we be different? What *is* holiness? When you think about it, to call human beings holy is a kind of contradiction in terms. "Holy" is by definition what makes God God and what distinguishes God from us. So what sense does it make to call us holy?

Let me try on you the idea that for us being holy means being supernaturally human. It means being human, but in a special way that is redolent of God, that is special, that is supernatural. The way Ann and I have to be holy is by coping with Ann's illness. The way other people have to be holy will be different. But as I think of the people I know best, I think of them being human, but of there being something special, something supernatural about them in your humanness.

I used to watch a television program called "How do they do that?" (for instance, how do they make certain "tricks" work in television advertisements). That is what I think of some of my friends. How does he do that? How does she manage to be that kind of person? It is probably something they are unconscious of, or take for granted, but for the rest of us it is what makes them special, what makes them holy. I do not think much about the heroics of coping with a wife who is disabled, and I am always a bit astonished when someone else comments on (for instance) the patience it needs. I know that people find it is something through which God gets access to us, in some mysterious way. It is as we let the people we are be the people we are with God, that the supernatural appears through the human and the world has the opportunity to see that there is something different about us.

But Moses is talking corporately. It is the people of God that he reminds that they are holy. Moses suggests that we are to believe in the church as God's holy people.

One of the modern translations has a nice version of one of the gospel comments about the Pharisees, whom it describes as people who wanted to sit at the front. That is what we want when we offer ourselves for the ministry. We look forward to sitting at the front. The people God calls holy are the people who sit in the body of the church.

I once listened to some senior pastors discussing how they decide policy issues in their churches. They spoke of the importance of the leadership deciding on their line about policy issues before the church council discussed them, otherwise it would be confusing for the people. Who are the holy people of God? Ministers are simply some paid functionaries whose position puts them in greater spiritual danger than anyone else in the church. It is the church that is a holy people, not as the ministry. It is the church that is in holy orders, by virtue of people's baptism. To put it in Deuteronomy's terms, the

declaration that God chose Israel comes before any talk of God's choosing the king. The people were familiar with the idea that God chose David. The Deuteronomists dared to preface it with the declaration that the choice of David, like the choice of the priesthood, was subordinate to the choosing of the whole people.

And Moses has in mind the actual people that stands before him, the visible church. It can be tempting to re-define the church to mean the group we belong to, the bit of the church that we think is really alive. And we can be cynical about the church that actually exists, as comes out in our jokes. When Moses says "you are a holy people," he is talking about the Israel that actually exists. It is the visible church that is holy, so we should not dismiss it or get cynical about it. "Remember that you are a holy people," Moses says.

Second, remember that you are loved. In chapter 8 I noted that it is better, if you have the choice, to fall in love with your friend than to try to make a friend of your lover. This is what God did. Moses uses two words for love. "It was not because you were more numerous than any other nation that Yahweh cared for you and chose you," he says. "Cared for you." "Set his affection on you," the NIV has. "How did Yahweh come to have those feelings for you, come to be attached to you?" asks Moses: he uses a word that can describe people's sexual feelings for each other. "Well it was not because there were so many of you," he answers. This is just as well. When the Deuteronomists were writing this sermon, Israel's heyday lay in the past, and it would be as well if the reason Yahweh was attached to them was not because there were so many of them. That is as well for us, too.

Perhaps it's the ecclesiological equivalent of "Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?" "When my hair is gone and I can't stay up as late as I once did, when I've gone pear-shaped and cellulite, will you still love me?" "It was not things about how you looked that made me love you in the first place, fathead." "So why did you love me?"

At this point, if you have got Nora Ephron as your scriptwriter you say as Harry did to Sally, "I love that you get cold when it's 71 degrees out. I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich. I love that you get a little crinkle above your nose when you're looking at me as though I'm nuts. I love that when I've been with you all day I can still smell your perfume on my clothes. And I love that you are the last person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night." If you have Hosea as your scriptwriter, it is the same. You say things like, "When I found Israel, it was like finding grapes in the desert."

But if you are you or me, when you get asked "So why do you love me?" you get lost for words and maybe you say "I just did, and I still do." So it is when the Deuteronomists are writing Yahweh's script. Moses moves to the other word for love, the all-purpose Hebrew word that can also suggest affection and passion but also friendship and commitment. "I didn't get attached to you because there were so many of you. It was just because I loved you. I had found myself committed to you and I couldn't get out of it. It had become part of me. I had to do what I'd told Abraham and Sarah I would do."

Remember you are loved: that God is attached to you and committed to you, for reason to do with you maybe, but certainly for reasons to do with God. No matter what seems to happen to the church, God loves it and will continue to be committed to it. It means God has not finished with it. God will fulfill the promises made to it.

That You Are Called to Knowledge, and Called to Follow God's Word

Third, remember that you are called to knowledge. When I had just been appointed principal of St John's, we had a visitor here for a week, and at a voluntary

meeting he asked the faculty who were present out in the front and prayed for us and gave each of us a word from God. Mine was that I had had a vision for St John's and I had not thought it would be fulfilled, but that it would be fulfilled.

I thought it referred to college being more relaxed about charismatic gifts, and more open, and that is so, but I came to realize something else. Sometimes one knows what a prophecy refers to only when it has been fulfilled, and we did see a quantum leap in our integration of theology and prayer and life, and that was always my subconscious vision, but I did not have much hope that these could ever come together and did not even articulate that vision, but God had it and shared it and it has come about.

"Know then that Yahweh your God is God," says Moses, and then adds some further theological facts about Yahweh that the people are to know. It sounds like the essence of doing theology, and it is. But the NRSV rightly translates it as "acknowledging" these facts about Yahweh, not just knowing them. It assumes that theology and commitment are one thing, not two things. When we are in the classroom we are not playing academic games. We are worshiping. And when we are in chapel, we are not playing religious games. We are knowing.

What are those facts about God? For Moses the key one is that God is faithful, someone who keeps covenant and commitment. "Know then that Yahweh your God is God, the faithful God."

I was glad about that because I felt in special need of it. I was leaving St John's because God made it clear that the moment had come. We are going where we are going not so much because God guided as because God pushed and manipulated. People ask me from time to time if I am excited about it, and the answer is "Not especially." It's just the direction God has pushed us. People say it is courageous; it would have required more courage to stay here. But all sorts of things could go wrong. We have sent our belongings off, but we still have not completed purchase on the apartment we have sent them to, and there are only ten days left, nor have we got a mortgage, and a package about that has gone astray in the post, nor have we got a visa, and the embassy phone lines are permanently busy. I expect all that will be okay; but there are other more personal things that could go wrong, and I have to trust that it is true that God is faithful.

Moses offers us various encouragements. He reminds us that Yahweh has been faithful in the past, keeping that promise to Abraham and Sarah. He reminds us that Yahweh bothered to exercise such power and bothered to deliver us into the freedom we already enjoy even when we are not actually in a promised land, so surely the wilderness will not be the end. He reminds us that there is a vast disparity between God's responsiveness to lovers and to haters. Punishment for the haters, yes; but faithfulness to 1000 generations for the lovers. One generation will do, thank you. For us I am at least as encouraged by the signs that it is indeed God who is doing the pushing and manipulating, so that if we end up in a mess and I feel as I sometimes do that God could have made my life a bit easier than other people's life looks, well at least I will know that I'm in this hole with God.

Remember that you are called to knowledge, and knowledge of the God who is faithful.

Fourth, remember that you are called to follow God's word. What Moses says more specifically is, "You are to observe these commandments, statutes, and laws which I give you this day, and keep them." I do not actually like that. I do not see why God is so keen on giving commandments. I mean, I am not very keen on giving commands; why is God? I do not want people to obey me; why does God? I cannot believe that if I were God I would be so keen on issuing orders. It seems such an odd thing to enjoy.

So at the moment this is an angle on scripture that I am trying to wrestle with. What are the equivalents for you? If there are not aspects of scripture that you do not like

and you have to wrestle with, then you are kidding yourself. It means you have bracketed them out or reinterpreted them. That is what as evangelicals we have to do. We know we have to accept all of scripture, so we make it mean something else so we can accept it.

That is the ultimate thing I want to leave students with. I want them to read the Bible, to be open to finding there things they had not realized were there, to be enthralled and dazzled and appalled and infuriated and puzzled and worried and stimulated and kept awake at night by these extraordinary words from God, to let their mind and heart and imagination and will be provoked and astonished by them. I want them to “observe them... and keep them.”

Remember that you are a holy people. Remember that you are loved. Remember that you are called to knowledge. Remember that you are called to follow God’s word. If we will commit ourselves to that, together and apart, you can cross your river, and I can climb my mountain.

16 Repentance

According to Psalm 32, confession is good for you. You find relief, forgiveness, protection, guidance, and a joy like heaven’s own.

John 8

As human beings we are all in the condemning and criticizing business (parents-teachers, rectors-congregations, police-community...). Perhaps this is partly because inside we feel condemned ourselves. Traditionally the church has been thought to have a particular preoccupation with sexual sin, despite the wonderful story in John 8 that subverts any such preoccupation. It is a story of someone who has indeed gone wrong sexually, though we are not in a position to assess degrees of blameworthiness; indeed, to do so would be to subvert the point of the story. The woman would be condemned by society, and specifically by religious society, as Aids victims are in ours. And we assume that God shares the condemning or criticizing attitude.

But we also know that God is not in the condemning business. The cross is the demonstration of that but this story shows it. First, Jesus denies being in the condemning business. Second, he therefore tells the woman she can go, uncondemned. Only after that does he say, “Sin no more.” It is easy either to be judgmental or to have no standards. Jesus holds mercy and standards together and gets them in the right order. “Neither do I condemn you. Go, and sin no more.” It must be one of the greatest lines in scripture.

I have the impression that many Christians are finding sin, guilt, confession, repentance, and forgiveness harder to handle than was once the case. The matter abounds in paradoxes. One is that I notice this phenomenon in the evangelical tradition to which I belong, despite the fact that it has always especially stressed the fact of forgiveness on the pure basis of what Jesus has done for us. Yet this same tradition has also been inclined to a form of legalism, of a focus on lists of “do’s and “don’ts.” More recently this is less so, and we do not feel bound by the taboos of our spiritual forebears (for instance, over Sunday observance or alcohol). But we do not seem to be more free, more grace-ful. Many of us carry round a deep sense of being unworthy, of being stained, of not loving God enough, of not praying enough. It seems that we assume that Job’s friends are right; our relationship with God depends on what we do, and if we do not do enough, then that relationship is imperiled. Our picture of God is of someone who always has a big stick hidden behind his back, ready to hit us with. We often characterize the Pharisees in the Gospels as assuming that we reach God by doing good things; the fact that neither the

Gospels nor other sources indicate that this was true about the Pharisees suggests that we may be the perpetrators and victims of the Freudian device of projection, whereby we attribute to other people the characteristics we cannot face in ourselves.

All those awarenesses of guilt are compounded by the more general sense of guilt among liberal and Christian people concerning the way we are spoiling the earth and oppressing the third world and living off the oppression of the past (for instance, of native Americans or native Australians). And all those awarenesses are destructive because we can do nothing about them except apparently trivial gestures such as signing petitions. So we just have to live with the guilt in the sense of living with the fact that we cannot avoid continuing to live in the wrong way.

It reminds me of the Harrison Ford courtroom drama *Presumed Innocent*. It is a story of adultery, murder, guilt, and punishment. Like a good suspense story it turns the plot upside down during the last ten minutes, but then it actually ends with a soliloquy about punishment: not the punishment the court imposes (for it does not) but the punishment imposed by the guilt with which the protagonists will live the rest of their lives, knowing what they have done. It is a very moral film, but a very bleak one.

Psalm 130

Not many of us carry about the burden of guilt and punishment that the characters in *Presumed Innocent* do, but we have our guilts: not just guilt feelings but true guilts for what we have failed to do. For us, Psalm 130 provides a way to pray and a model of repentant prayer.

Repentance involves recognizing the depth of our problem with sin. "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord." Praying out of the depths is a common idea in the Psalms. We pray overwhelmed by trouble, overburdened by pressures, pressed down by opposition; everything is on top of us. Here in Psalm 130 the problem is not merely our circumstances or fears or sufferings or doubts but our sins: not what life or other people or God have done to us, but what we have done with life and to other people and to God.

Both those are important. I can see myself as someone needy, insecure, troubled, and hurt, and come to God as the one who heals me. I can also see myself as responsible, self-centered, failed, and guilty, and come to God as one who forgives me. In the churches I know best, it used to be the case that the second of those was emphasized and the first ignored. The problem now is the opposite: healing has all the focus.

So Psalm 130 puts an important challenge before us. It asks us whether we see ourselves as sinners, as in very deep water because of our sin. The psalm implies that we need to be specific about it. It speaks not just of sin but of sins such as God might keep a detailed record of. If we do not see where our areas of sin are, we may need to do some enquiring of God (and some enquiring of other people).

Repentance involves bowing before the graciousness of a forgiving God. Once we do see that we are in deep water because of sin, that can be deeply discouraging. It can suggest we have a rather 1984-kind of God, one who indeed carries a stick behind his back ready to punish us. "Every step you take, every smile you fake, I'll be watching you." "If you, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?"

The words remind us of the tax-collector who could not stand before God because he felt he would only be shriveled by God's justice, or of Peter shrinking back from Jesus with his "depart from me because I am a sinful man, Lord," or of another psalmist with his awed contemplation of the fact that wherever we go, God would be able to reach us; we could never get away (see Psalm 139).

But in God's eyes it is not like that. The last word of verse 2 has already hinted at it. The word is "grace" (the NIV translates it "mercy"). It is the kind of grace we are

familiar with in human experience when someone else has every reason to be extremely angry with us and we are amazed to find that they are not. That is how God is. Forgiveness is “with” God: it is God’s next-door-neighbor, God’s nearest and dearest. It is the very essence of God.

It would be easy to take that for granted and trade on it. Instead, the psalm says, that is why God is feared, held in awe. Suppose you have let someone down and they do not hold it against you. If you are really sorry you do not then trade on that; you try to do what is best and least hassle for them. So it is between us and God. Grace and forgiveness are of the essence of God; and they make us bow before God.

Repentance involves trusting in the word of God. In human relationships, we may not know whether we will be forgiven. Nervously we confess that we have made some mistake, not knowing what the reaction will be. We wait anxiously for the response of the person we have wronged. So the psalm likens our anxiety to someone watching and waiting for the morning. Perhaps it refers to the ministers in the temple watching for the dawn and the moment when they are due to offer the morning sacrifice, perhaps to sentries keeping watch in case an enemy attacks, so that dawn means another night is safely over. Either way it is a keen-eyed anticipation.

With that keenness we wait for the word of God. Will God forgive? It is his job, Voltaire said. No, says the psalm, you cannot take it for granted. After all, there was more than one occasion in the scriptures when a prayer for forgiveness was refused because God knew that people were not really repentant and had not really changed (e.g., Jeremiah 14.7-10).

But in another sense we can be sure that if we really do turn back to God, God will forgive. Jonah knew that; it was the reason why he did not want to go and preach to the Ninevites. The God of Israel is compassionate, gracious, and longsuffering (Exodus 34:6-7). Forgiveness is indeed this God’s business.

Repentance involves receiving something which it is then our privilege to share. The psalm pictures God giving us both forgiveness and freedom, both mercy and redemption. Real repentance cannot mean that I stay as I was before. God frees me from sin’s penalty and thereby also frees me from sin’s power. My problem is that I’m in bondage to guilt and self-centeredness, and repentance and forgiveness free me from both of these.

That is the psalm’s testimony. It speaks of the freedom that comes from being forgiven. The psalm is indeed a testimony at this point. It speaks to other people, not directly to God. It presupposes that everything that God does for me is done not just for me but for other people. We tell each other what God has done for us individually, and that builds up faith and worship and leads to God getting the glory. We weep with those who weep, and we rejoice with those who rejoice.

After watching *Presumed Innocent* again, I went to bed awed and grateful that in the real world the Jesus who died and rose is one who makes it both necessary and possible to face guilt and then to live with it in a way that prevents its being a weight hanging round one’s neck for ever. That is something to tell the world and the church about.

Mercy on Me

So what God does for us is also done for a non-Christian world that knows it is guilty and in bondage to the past and to other people and to the world and to oneself. An album by Prefab Sprout includes this simple song:

Mercy on me,

Oh say that I'm forgiven and wrap your arms around me.
To your goodness I surrender...

Yes, that is the world's need, but it is also the need of a church full of people whose sense of guilt spoils their lives and who need a sense of forgiveness to remake them. Perhaps it is significant that the composer of the song, Paddy McAloon, was once an ordinand.

The composer Gavin Bryars tells how he acquired some unused film of people living rough in London, including footage of a tramp singing:

Jesus' blood never failed me yet.
There's one thing I know, for he loves me so.

Bryars was moved by it and wanted to do something with it, looping the tape and adding accompaniment. "When I copied the loop onto the continuous reel in Leicester [at the university where he worked], I left the door of the recording studio open while I went downstairs to get a cup of coffee. When I came back I found the normally lively room unnaturally subdued. People were moving about much more slowly than usual, and a few were sitting alone, quietly weeping."

In contrast, Lou Reed and John Cale, two members of the Velvet Underground, might seem markedly anti-religious characters. *Songs For Drella* was their tribute to Andy Warhol after he died, their way of coming to terms with grief and guilt. In the last track Lou Reed talks to Warhol as if he were still alive, about wishing he had talked with him more before his death, about how he had misinterpreted the artist's shyness, about how he misses talking with him and watching him paint. He remembers turning away from Warhol the last time he saw him because of things that had got between them, and he sings about "resentments that can never be unmade," and about the fact that making an album is the only way a musician knows to try to express regret. It closes: "Hello, it's me – goodnight, Andy. Goodbye, Andy."

17 Retro-reading/Resurrection

Looking Back to the Beginning

There is a hymn by Brian Wren called "Sing my song backwards." The idea is that there is a sense in which you always have to understand the gospel story from where it ends. When you hear the account of Jesus being crucified, or undertaking his ministry, or being baptized, or being born, you know this is a story that ends with him being raised in glory, and that makes a whole difference to the way you read the story as a whole. That is one level that the Gospels themselves work on, in different ways. Their account of Jesus' life and death is the story of someone who is on the way to being raised in glory.

So Luke's Gospel, for instance, starts with an explanation of why Luke is telling his story. It is because it is the basis of Christian faith; these are the things that have been fulfilled, and witnessed to, and preached. The opening of Luke's Gospel presupposes that Jesus is risen and that there *is* a gospel. When he has explained that, Luke goes back to the beginning of the Jesus story, and we read it in light of where it is going. Even when we read the opening account of something that happened fifteen months before Jesus was born, we read about this event in light of the resurrection of Jesus.

Luke is inviting us to live together through this story from the lives of Elizabeth and Zechariah. Imagine yourself as one of these two people.

You live in the time of Herod, the Herod who built the temple, and who might seem to be someone on your side. But he built shrines to other gods as well, and fortresses such as Caesarea and Sebastia and the Antonia in Jerusalem, all in honor of Roman rulers, Roman oppressors. It was they who had made him king; he was a foreigner and had no right to the throne. He was someone who always had reason for feeling insecure about his position, and someone who had no hesitation about slaughtering anyone who looked a threat to him: the Hasmonean family, who had a claim to his throne because they were the successors of the Maccabees, or the baby boys of Bethlehem because one of them was supposed to be on the way to the throne of his ancestor David.

You are a man or a woman who lives under that kind of political regime. Imagine living under whatever oppressive regime is making the headlines as you read this; or imagine living in Jerusalem itself today. Imagine the insecurity, the subjection, the constraint, the shame, the disgust, the longing for a better future.

You live in the time of King Herod. You belong to the clan of Aaron, the clan of priests. It is a position to be proud of. But you have not let that go to your head. You are someone who puts God first, someone who lives the whole of life before God and walks in God's way. You are someone distinguished for their position, then, but also distinguished for their personal piety. But then you are someone of a personal inner grief. You have not been able to have children. You tried for years, saw doctors and hoped and prayed, but it never happened. Now you are in your forties and it looks as if it never will happen.

Yet you know those stories about Sarah and Abraham, and Manoa and his wife, and Hannah and Elkanah. Sometimes you have shared those stories with other people in distress like yours, and you have told people that this God is our God, and that has sharpened the hurt inside that it does not seem to apply to you. You know that pain keeps the heart soft, and of course you know that the God of Israel is a great God and that the privilege of serving that God is worth everything, that having that God means you can live with any other pain.

But on the dark days, when people say how privileged it is to belong to the priestly tribe, the tribe of Aaron, inside you are tempted to say "I'd swap with anybody, I'd swap with a Samaritan if we could have a baby." And when you think about the way you seek to live close to God and walk in God's way, on the dark days you wonder whether it is worthwhile at all, and you ask what is the point, and wonder whether God is really there.

You are Zechariah or Elizabeth, with that experience. Outside of this fantasy you are also you. You are a person with a position to be proud of, daughter or son of God. You are someone with a relationship with God to be proud of, someone who puts God first. Are you someone with a pain that casts a gloomy cloud over all that, on the dark days? Can you name your position and your commitment and your pain to the God of Elizabeth and Zechariah?

What kind of day is it today, Zechariah, Elizabeth? Workwise, it is a very special day. The priests were divided into worship teams, which served a week on and then had twenty-three weeks off, which is better than most church's rota. If you were a priest and it was your week on, there were so many priests that they had to draw lots for the best privilege, for the task of being the person who burnt the incense before the Lord in the temple. It was this person who actually sent the prayers of people up to God. They crowded round the temple praying. You made the smoke go up, and you prayed for them, for God's blessing and peace, grace and compassion, to come to them from God. And then you came out and blessed them with that prayer that Moses gave the priests: "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you, and the Lord give you peace." It was something you got the chance to do once in your life, if you were lucky.

And this is your day, Zechariah. And your day, Elizabeth, because it means a lot for you as well. Maybe you have asked yourself why women cannot take part the way the men do. But all the same it is very precious to you that Zechariah can. In spirit you are with him there in the temple. And both of you are concentrating on Israel and God and the relationship between them, and Israel's need of God's grace, and their need for God to deliver them from their oppression. At least, you are trying to concentrate on that, because you know that this is a day more than any other for forgetting yourselves and your personal needs. But this is the most precious day of your ministry as a couple, the moment when your ministry takes you nearest God, and you cannot help also being more aware than ever of the pain in your heart, and more agonized than ever by that puzzle at the center of your relationship with God.

Then something happens to you, Zechariah. It is going to be a long time before he can tell you all about it, Elizabeth, but eventually you will hear it from his lips, and you can imagine every detail of the scene. There is somebody else there in the holy place, where there should only be Zechariah. A figure in white stands by the altar. It looks like another priest, and for a moment you thought it was, but no one else should be there; and though the figure looks human, there is something about it that tells you it is not. You were keyed up already and a bit awestruck today, but now you are overcome by a different kind of awe.

The messenger knows this, and tells you not to be afraid. God has heard your prayer. But you have not really got through the prayers yet. What does the message mean? It means the prayer that arises from your own pain. The prayer you have often stopped praying, the pain you have stopped talking about to each other. God has heard that prayer. You, Elizabeth, are going to have a baby. But it does not just mean the prayer for a baby. It means the prayer for Israel as well. This baby is going to be the means of bringing Israel back to God, the means of preparing a people for the Lord. He will be God's answer to your personal prayer, and also God's answer to the prayer that arises out of your ministry. Your need and Israel's need, your prayer for yourselves and your prayer for God's purpose to be fulfilled, the two will be one when they are answered. It was all right to interweave your prayers for yourself and your prayers for your people, because God is inclined to interweave the answers.

This turns out to be Easter-kind of story. It is a story about people with a deep pain in their hearts because God seems to have let them down, about people with a cross in their hearts. It is a story about an angel appearing and banishing fear and declaring that for them what seemed impossible and undreamable was about to become fact. It is a story about the reality of new life when there seemed only lifelessness and barrenness. It is a story about people whose personal pain was mixed up with the pain that their ministry had brought them, and about both these pains being healed by an act of God they hardly dared hope for.

Be yourself again for a moment. Name again that pain of heart that lies hidden in you. Bring to mind the deep longing you have that you hardly dare make a matter of prayer, because it is evidently not God's will to do anything about it, and thinking about it makes it worse. It is a deep longing that is therefore best just forgotten, and you do forget it, except for those moments in the night when you cannot and you cry out in the dark that this is your longing and it cannot be fulfilled. Imagine you are standing before God praying for your people but aware of that pain of your own and that God says, "Your prayer has been heard." Imagine the impossibility becoming possibility.

I hesitated to invite you to do this because of the hurt that is involved. Merely on the basis of the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah I might not. But I can do it on the basis of reading the story backwards, beginning Luke's Gospel after Easter. The resurrection promises that the hope that came to Elizabeth and Zechariah is not the exception, it is the

rule. I do not know how or when, but I know that there will be a fulfillment of that vision in Isaiah 25 of the veil of pain and grief and mourning that lies over us all being cast away when the Lord swallows up death in all its forms for ever and wipes away the tears from every face. It is Easter truth. It was too overwhelming a promise for Zechariah himself to cope with. But we have reason to believe it.

At the end of the story both of you, son and daughter of Aaron, have to go back home and get on with the job of life. You are a bit like the disciples after the resurrection. They are not due to go out to tell the world yet. You are not saying anything to anyone yet, Elizabeth. You go back to the same place, to the same tasks. But you go with a different hope, and with new life budding in the womb. You go singing a song that begins with the resurrection and only goes through crosses afterwards.

Looking Forward

It is daybreak in Jerusalem. Women arrive from the villages around, with their bundles of herbs, eggs and produce to sell near the city gate. They still come nowadays, dignified women, inscrutable. Behind their reserved faces you wonder what is going on inside their heads and their hearts (they are victims of political intransigence on the part of Palestinian and Israeli men, but that is another story).

There are also three women leaving Jerusalem. They, too, are women of reserve, dignity, and inner pain, grieving for a man they all loved, a dead messiah. They are going to anoint his body. They are still coming to terms with the idea of him being dead, and perhaps they want to go and look at his body, to tell it that they cared. They are confused, and half-way there realize they will not be able to get into the tomb because of the boulder in front of it.

It is not Easter Sunday in their lives yet. Spring, when the days get lighter and the trees bud, is a peak time for committing suicide. What the calendar says and what nature says conflicts with what is happening inside people; they cannot bear the difference. There was a South American Indian tribe exploited and oppressed by government, business, and industry. At Easter they observed only Holy Week, not Easter Day. It was not real for them. We are not expected to jolly such people out of that, though we may look for the way God may want to bring Easter reality to them.

One Good Friday a Christian woman came to see me because she was being assaulted by her husband. She was trying to make the marriage work in a civilized way and to bring their children up happily, but he would turn on her, although she felt she was trying so hard. "And there's no justice," I remember her saying, with a Good Friday anguish. It had not changed much by Easter Day. It can still be Good Friday for us, when the calendar says Easter Day. At least we can be with people in their Good Friday.

The two Marys and Salome discover something which suggests that Good Friday has passed. The boulder has moved. Inside the tomb is a young man in a white suit looking as pleased as Punch, brushing flicks of rock dust from his sleeves: "How about that then?" ("All right, what do you do for an encore?"). He has pushed the stone away, not to let Jesus out (he left a while ago), but to let people in to see that he has gone, to let witnesses see that the tomb is empty.

"No-one's stolen the body," the lad says. "That's where he lay down, but he's got up, gone back to Galilee. He'll see you there. Tra." And (whoosh) the young man is gone.

Jesus and his friends were never really at home in Jerusalem. Jesus had work to do there, but now he has done it, and he is back north. Galilee was not quieter; it was busier in its way, more multi-ethnic, than Jerusalem. It was not safer; people had tried to kill Jesus there, Jerusalem just happened to be the place where they succeeded. It was not

merely that Galilee was home; home was where they had first rejected him. Urban, multi-ethnic, unfashionable, needy, hard Galilee was where God had first sent Jesus to preach and work signs of God's reign. So that is where he is off to. He will see them there, if they want to join him in his mission to that ordinary world.

Jesus had gone elsewhere just when he seemed bound to stay in one place. He is so unpredictable, always missing from where you thought you could find him and present somewhere different from what you thought you had a right to expect. He promises to be somewhere, and when you get there you find that he was there but has now moved on again.

The women were prepared to face up to the fact that Jesus had become a corpse. They were not hiding from reality like the men. They were prepared to adjust, to begin living in the light of reality and loss, of pain and disappointment. Then they find that he is not there, the young man in the white suit says he is alive, and they are invited to go and tell the men, and Peter, and to begin hoping again.

"Tell the disciples and Peter." Does Peter still count as a disciple, the man who first fell asleep, then disowned Jesus, then kept well away from the cross? People who have done things that make them wonder whether they still count as disciples are invited to put their own name in the sentence - "Tell the disciples and ... John (or whoever it is) that I will see them in Galilee."

"So the women were thrilled to bits and ran to tell them." Not on your life. At the beginning of the story they are grieving and hurt, at the end trembling and bewildered, running scared and not telling anyone anything. After all, imagine your business is about to fold. You are just getting used to the idea when someone says there is a miracle solution. Do you believe them, just like that, and rush out to tell the world? Aren't you afraid, half-wishing they had not told you because you don't know where you are again now, you don't know what to believe? "It's not the despair I can't stand, it's the hope."

The women's silence cannot be the end of this story, otherwise we would not know about it. Indeed, this is a wholly strange account of Jesus' resurrection. Jesus is not even there. Perhaps that enables us to put ourselves into the story. We live our lives between an empty tomb and a Jesus who is already over the horizon, only a cloud of dust. We do not see Jesus being raised from the dead. We have the evidence. There is no corpse in the tomb. He is gone. But it happened before we got here. We did not see him.

Nor can we see Jesus with us now. We will see him when he appears at the End, but that is in the future. We may miss what he is doing or saying in the present because we are blind to it, like those disciples. Mark says to us, "Open your eyes, get your walking boots on, Jesus is alive, he is off to work in the world, if you hurry you can catch up with him and join in. The Twelve are disillusioned and demoralized, they may not be there. Even the women are beside themselves with fear. Nobody will do it unless you and I do."

18 Struggle

"How vast are the resources of God's power open to us as believers. His mighty strength was seen at work when he raised Christ from the dead." So the beginning of Ephesians (1:19-20a). It is part of its resurrection gospel. At the end of the letter that theme comes back. It is not so obvious that this is also an Easter passage, but it is. "Finally, find your strength in the Lord, in his mighty power" (6:10). The strength we are told is available to us is the power that brought Jesus from the dead. That is not just the power to resuscitate a bag of bones, which medics will be able to do one day. It is the power to give Jesus a new kind of life, the life of the new age and the new heavens and the

new earth. That power is available to us. And it needs to be. Because “our struggle is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark age, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavenly realms. That is why you must take up the armor of God” (6:12-13a).

Trench Warfare

There was a moment in our fellowship group towards the end of term when we were praying for each other, I think, and I found myself thinking round the group and realizing that in virtually every one of them individually I knew God had been at work in different ways. I knew how God had been at work, often in painful ways as it tends to be at seminary. In each case spiritual progress was being made, but somehow it tended to be quite hard work, and I saw that what was true of these individuals was also true of St John’s as a whole. The picture that came into my mind was of trench warfare. The image did actually mesh with pictures that one or two people in the group had had on other occasions last term. We were an army that had been making progress that year. But every inch had had to be fought for, every yard had been hard work, every foot paid for in blood, every centimeter required huge effort because it met resistance. We had been advancing, but it had been like trench warfare.

Indeed, other things had happened that could make us doubt whether God was really at work, things that threatened to waste unnecessary energy, things that led people to misunderstand each other. And those are the marks of our being in a battle, with forces that like to discourage and deceive. A battle in which we are on the way to the blessing that God’s promises to us for this year, but progress toward that blessing involves struggle. It is not a blessing that will be easily reached, as we might presuppose at some springlike moments in our life with God. It is a blessing only reached through conflict. Because “our struggle is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark age.”

The Bible does not go into great detail about the nature of the spiritual forces we contend with. It does not seem to know more than you and I know, that there is more to evil than meets the eye. It is not just the sum of its parts; it is not exhausted by the nature of individual or corporate human wickedness or neglect. The way we experience it makes that clear. The Bible assumes this and does not tell you much more about it, but then concentrates on pointing you to the way of victory.

We are involved in a struggle against the ruling forces that are masters in a dark age. The powers of evil specialize in ruling, in exercising authority. As far as one can see from Genesis, there was no authority structure designed for human life in the world except the one contained in God. There was no authority of one human being over another until after sin came into the world; this was when people began to exercise domination over each other. Human authority and resistance to human authority both belong to this age, not to the age of creation or the age of new creation. Whenever human authority is being exercised, we are in the realm where the powers of darkness operate.

That applies to the world and to the church. When pastors or bishops give in to the temptation to act in an authoritarian way, or in a manipulative way, they act under the influence of the powers of darkness. When church councils or pastors either accept that kind of authority or rebel against it, they are working with the assumption that the church operates as an institution that belongs by its inner nature to this age. They are colluding with the powers of darkness. And the same is true in seminary, with the way a principal and faculty and students operate. We get sucked into a way of operating that is the way of the powers of darkness, and we surely want to stand firm in opposition to that.

What are your weapons and your protection in this conflict?

Stand fast. Fasten on the belt of truth; for a breastplate put on integrity; let the shoes on your feet be the gospel of peace; and with all these take up the great shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the burning arrows of the evil one. Accept salvation as your helmet, and the sword which the Spirit gives you, the word of God.” (6:14-17)

There are two types of things that this armor and weaponry stand for. There are things that involve us in doing something, and things we simply receive. The experts vary on the way they decide which are which, but both are there. The straightforward way to read the passage I think is to reckon that it talks first about three things that involve us doing something: truth, and integrity, and witness. Then it talks about three things that are more matters of what we receive: faith, and salvation, and the gospel.

The three things that involve our activity all come from Isaiah. Truth as the belt that holds you together. Isaiah refers not to *the* truth, which would mean the gospel, but simply truth. The phrase refers to the armor the messiah wears. Our own uprightness is one of the things that hold us together in battle. Then, integrity as our breastplate, protecting us back and front. In Isaiah, the phrase refers to the armor God wears in battle. Our own straightness protects us. And third, the gospel of peace on our feet. The expression picks up that quaint talk in Isaiah about beautiful feet bringing good news about peace to the exiles. Our armor includes our activity: our being people of truth and integrity and encouragement.

When I had had that picture of trench warfare, I went to talk with a colleague about how that might apply to the seminary, and we talked about various things, which later on I found with some others in Ephesians 6 - typically the Bible had got there first. My colleague's word for these aspects of the soldier's armor that point to our responsibility was the word "holiness." "What do you mean," I asked. He hesitated for a split second, and then said "Sexual purity. I don't mean I suspect that there are things going on that shouldn't be," he said. "It is just that I know from my own heart that that is an area we always have to protect." If we are in a battle this is an area that we are bound to need to protect, or one where we are bound to need protection. What can one say about it?

It is not merely a question of sex outside marriage being wrong, partly because that can let us who are married off too lightly. Selfish sex within marriage can be just as sinful as sex outside marriage. I wonder whether one of the key questions anybody has to ask about a sexual relationship is how far it is actually selfish over against how far I am in it for the other person's benefit, and that is surely one of the key moral questions about sexual relations. To put it crudely, it is not merely a question of what you do with certain bits of your body, it is about how fair what you are doing is, it is about why you are doing it, it is about what in the end this activity and this relationship will do to this other person, and to other people to whom you and they have commitments. Those questions are raised sharply and perhaps unanswerably by every act of extra-marital sex, but they are also raised uncomfortably by every act of marital sex. Is it really an act of love? It is interesting that God's words to Eve in Genesis 3 put together authoritarianism and sexual selfishness as the consequences of humanity's disobedience: "Your desire will be for your husband and he will rule over you." As Derek Kidner puts it in his commentary, to love and to cherish becomes to desire and to dominate.

Sexual relationships have become for our age a key means by which you realize yourself, and Christians are inevitably affected by that sort of expectation. It is interesting that in the very preceding chapter of Ephesians the question of the significance of sex has been raised in quite different terms. There we get explicit instruction on the significance

of sex, there we get the only explicit biblical teaching on the headship of a man over his wife. It makes it absolutely clear that there is a biblical doctrine of headship, and it makes it clear what that doctrine is. It is that men have the unquestionable right and responsibility to let themselves be crucified for women, and that women must let them do that.

It is typical that scripture should take a worldly assumption and let the cross turn it upside down. The world says – or did in that culture – “men have authority over women.” The Bible says “Yes, they have the authority Christ showed on the cross.” Biblical headship is nothing at all to do with men deciding how to bring up the children or where the family should live. It is about letting yourself be walked on. That is the Bible’s pattern for relations between the sexes. Marriage gives you lots of chances to live that way; single people are called to make that their criterion for their relationships too. In our relationships the other person comes first. My hunch is that although there may sometimes seem to be little chance of marital relations being that way, there is even less chance with extra-marital ones – they are even more likely to end up in hurt rather than in love.

Truth, integrity, and encouragement: these are responsibilities we exercise, important ones if we are to be protected in our conflict. Let them be the way we relate to one another as sexual beings. Maybe the area of holiness you have to think about is a different one, in which case you will need to think out what truth and integrity and encouragement mean there.

The Grace to Meet the Challenge

Then there are the shield, which is faith, and the helmet, which is salvation, and the Spirit’s sword, which is the word God speaks. They all sound more like things you receive. So in Ephesians the challenge comes first, and the grace you need to meet the challenge comes second. And that is all right with me; as long as grace comes somewhere, it’ll be okay. Certainly we need the gospel at this point, because we all fail as sexual beings, just as we fail in the way we cope with exercising authority or reacting to it, and fail in other areas, and we can be driven into more failure precisely by the awareness of failure and guilt. We need armor to protect us from that.

It is not just the feeling of guilt, which again as people of Western culture we may be inclined to concentrate on, but the fact of guilt. We carry that as a burden around with us, the things that we know we have done, the things we wish we had done, the fantasies we would like to turn into realities. They become unbearable burdens that drive us into more failure, unless the gospel gets applied to them. So Ephesians challenges us about our responsibilities and then reassures us about our resources.

Faith quenches all the fiery darts of the evil one. The evil one throws our failures into our face, loves to make us feel more and more guilty and paralyzed and driven to despair and to more failure. Faith showers our face clean, quenches those burning arrows. How does “faith” do that? Not because it is a matter of faith in faith, but because it is a matter of faith in Christ as our savior. There is not a lot of difference between a lot of these pieces of armory - it is poetic imagery not an listing from Ebay. To talk about the shield of faith is really the same as to talk about the helmet of salvation or to talk about the Spirit’s sword being the word of God.

When the New Testament talks about the word of God, what it usually means is the gospel, the message about Christ that God has given us. The sword the Holy Spirit gives us to wield at the evil one is the gospel.

Suppose the evil one rubs my nose in the fact that I’m a sexual failure. Not in the sense that the world thinks of sexual failure. In the world’s terms I might be a sexual

success. But in terms of my relationships being something through which I express integrity and uprightness and encouragement I am a failure. That is the point at which Jesus utters those wonderful words in John's Gospel, "I don't condemn you," and those are the kind of gospel words about salvation that my faith clings onto and that I throw back in the evil one's face with a grin when I am reminded that I've been a failure. The word of God is the Spirit's sword. And when I have done that, I can also face the words Jesus goes on to utter, "Neither do I condemn you. You can go. Sin no more."

The shield of faith and the helmet of salvation and the Spirit's sword, the word of the gospel: if we are to make progress in this trench warfare with the evil one who will do anything to prevent us getting to the place of blessing that God's promise has set before us, we had better keep that armor on.

There is one more thing this paragraph of Ephesians presses on us. "Constantly ask God's help in prayer, and pray always in the power of the Spirit. To this end keep watch and persevere, always interceding for all God's people. Pray also for me." (6:18-19a)

Prayer is a subject on which it is even easier than is the case with sex to make people feel guilty rather than free. These words in Ephesians *are* an exhortation, they are about the responsibility of prayer, but they are not designed to make us feel guilty but to remind us of another resource we have in the spiritual battle we wage together. Feel encouraged, if you like, that the New Testament has to keep reminding you to pray and that the Old Testament includes so many examples of how to pray. They indicate that people did not find it easy then, so we need not feel inferior. "Pray at all times with all prayer and supplication. Keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints," the RSV puts it more literally. In his commentary, John Stott points out that it does not say "sometimes with some prayer and some perseverance for some of your brothers and sisters," but all prayer and all perseverance for all the saints at all times. Covenanting to pray for each other in that way as we engage in our trench warfare with the evil one sounds like another key to the battle for the blessing being won. Perhaps it would *be* the blessing.

"Keep watch," we are told. "Be alert." Take Jesus on Maundy Thursday as your model for the way you operate by resurrection power from Easter Tuesday. The power that brought Jesus from the dead is available to us, and it needs to be if we are to reach the blessing God has promised us. It is not just the power to resuscitate a bag of bones, it is the power to give Jesus a wholly new kind of life, the life of the new age and the new heavens and the new earth. It is available to us.

19 Tears

I cannot remember whether I used to cry ten years ago. I do not think I was especially averse to crying or was embarrassed by the idea or felt that I had to keep a stiff upper lip in all circumstances. I do not remember it being an issue. But I am aware that in recent years I have found myself crying relatively often.

Like many people (women, anyway), I cry in films. I wept near the end of *Once Upon a Time in America* and *Paris, Texas* and *When Harry Met Sally* and *The English Patient* and *Leaving Las Vegas*, I remember. I am sure there are others, but those are among my favorite films. I howled on our sofa at the end of reading *The Bridges of Madison County*, before seeing the film. I wept at the beginning of *Sleepless in Seattle* and again at the end: it was the only time I wept at both ends of a film, I think, but there was reason in terms of the story. In all those films there is something about the toughness of human experience, about pain or loss, about guilt or helplessness, about bondage to our

personalities or our past, about bravery or acceptance of the inevitable, or occasionally about happiness you did not believe would ever come (even if at head-level you knew the plot required it).

Unlike many people, perhaps (or perhaps not), I sometimes want to cry in my own sermons, and essentially for the same sort of reasons. I used to preach a sermon on Samson (before it appeared in print in *After Eating the Apricot*) and I always had to hold back a tear at the last line of it, at the fact that Samson who fell so far short of all he should have been is in the cloud of witnesses in Hebrews 11: “and if there is room for Samson, there is room for you and me.” And in this book I have referred to a number of occasions when I have found myself in tears. Looking back over the chapters, I discover that I have wept because at one level I was afraid lest I could not sustain the demands that my job placed on me. I have wept at the reminder of the commitment I made to let God be my only desire. I have wept in talking students through the story of Job. I have wept through becoming overwhelmingly aware of God’s love. I have wept in saying goodbye to people, at losing people. I have wept in recognizing my loneliness and the length of the journey and the number of rivers there are to cross. I have wept in having to take Ann for a routine stay at her rehabilitation centre. I have wept at the awareness of God’s rejoicing in me. I have thus wept at sad moments, and more strikingly at moments of joy. I have found how weeping our own tears and discovering what they mean may be part of acknowledging hurts and sins from which we have hidden and may thus be part of finding forgiveness and healing.

Tears and Power

So tears are strange things. Maggie Ross has written a book about tears called *The Fountain and the Furnace: The Way of Tears and of Fire* (Paulist, 1987). She talks about the connection between the gift of tears and the gift of joy, and about the way tears unlock joy. They can signify that we are giving up self, and thus finding self; so in death is life. The salt of tears is the savor of life (pp. 21, 22, 29). Tears are a mark of having touched reality (p. 227). I have mentioned John of the Cross, who talks much (as other mystical writers do) of our love relationship with Jesus. He often refers to scripture in this connection, especially to the Song of Songs. The trouble is that the Song of Songs seems originally to have been a collection of ordinary human love songs, not poems about our love for God. That awareness about the original meaning of John’s favorite book sent me off on a hunt for passages of scripture that directly refer to an emotional love relationship between us and God. These turned out to be hard to find. I was then interested to discover that the person who most clearly reveals an emotional love for Jesus does so with tears (Luke 7:38).

I can think of four possible reasons for my own greater susceptibility to tears. The first is that I have grown older. One of the things that happens, they say, as you come to middle age is that sides of your personality that you had not previously realized can find expression. You can own your “shadow side.” For me, tears may be part of the complement to a hardness with both positive and negative sides that was more characteristic of me for my first forty-odd years. The second is that because of Ann’s illness I have felt more pain over the past ten years than in earlier years of my life. The third is related to those first two. It is that the tears issue from having God pierce a way into my life through the fact that Ann and I have had to live with Ann’s illness. That has perhaps reached into me and brought to the surface realities and capacities that would otherwise have lain unrealized.

The fourth is quite unrelated, except in the providence of God (which is quite an exception). The tears link in some way to being a theological college principal (others

who have occupied this position will allow themselves a wry smile, or a wry tear). I felt some ambiguity about becoming a principal. I used to say that I had no desire or need to be in charge of the seminary, to be the number one, to carry that responsibility. I deserve to have had someone say (perhaps they did say behind my back) (no, they were the kind of people who said things to one's face) that I behaved as if I was in charge of the place even when I was not, and in that sense I had no need to be formally in charge. I had the advantages of being involved in leadership without the disadvantage of formal responsibility. It was certainly the case that one of the great things about the seminary, which I remember discovering in my first faculty meeting, was that if you had a good idea, it would be recognized and accepted even if you were the most junior person in the place. Conversely, if you could not get people to recognize the strength of your ideas, mere seniority in the system would not enable you to get them implemented.

On the other hand, I may secretly have suspected that as principal I would have the opportunity to exercise different forms of influence. I could shape agenda (literally and metaphorically) and set styles and throw my weight about. Once in a meeting when we were discussing a proposal, I said very firmly something like "I cannot agree to our doing that," and we decided not to do it. Later over tea there was an interesting discussion about (a) whether I was vetoing the proposal, and (b) whether people let it fall because they thought I was vetoing it, or (c) whether people let it fall because I felt so strongly about it. I did not know what I was doing, though if challenged I think I would have seen the remark as a contribution to debate not an end to debate, and I would have recognized (indeed in the discussion I pointed out) that I had no power to veto things. But subconsciously I may have intended the ambiguity and may have been intending to short-circuit debate.

Becoming principal meant that my relationship with power became more ambiguous than it had been previously. It was about then that I became acquainted with the writings of Maggie Ross. In her later book *Pillars of Flame: Power, Priesthood and Spiritual Maturity* (SCM, 1988) she takes up the conviction that priesthood ought to reflect God and who God is in Christ.

What God does is God's priesthood reaching across the abyss of illusion we create by presumption to control. As God's image we seek to mirror God's outpouring. God creates with self-abnegation outpoured, continues and sustains this creation *by going to the heart of pain that dwells within the Creator's self-restraint and is inherent in creation's freedom, and from this total self-denudation God generates new life, hope, and joy.* (p. 38; her emphasis)

So tears are central to emptying oneself of one's glory; they "are a sign that we are struggling with power of one sort or another: the loss of ours; the entering of God's" (p. 124). More generally,

If we are to mirror God, to be in God's image... we have to be willing to enter our individual wounds and through them the wounds of the community.... We have to be willing to enter the wound of God. We have to be willing to enter these wounds, not hide them by casuistry, not seal them up, nor scar them over. (p. xvii)

We can attempt to avoid this by seeking pseudo-healing, which removes from us the possibility of the resurrection that comes through "learning to live with, in, and through pain, to adjust to our wounding" (p. xviii).

In recent years there has been some talk of “the gift of tears.” That talk invites us to see tears as inspired by the Spirit in a way that perhaps parallels tongues. Each is both wordless and expressive. Tears are a gift that may make us able to empathize with others, to express our prayer for them in a physical way, to free them to express their own hurt or joy, and to free ourselves to express ours. “What my own experience reflects is that if there is anything spiritual about tears, they have the same mixture of supernatural and natural as other gifts do (not least tongues).

Besides Isaac the Syrian, whom Maggie Ross refers to, one of the other classic writers on tears is Teresa of Avila. She was a sixteenth-century Spanish spiritual writer, like John of the Cross. In *The Interior Castle*, one of the great classics on the development of our relationship with God, she notes that tears can be of supernatural or of very natural significance.

I have seen people shed tears over some great [natural] joy; sometimes, in fact, I have done it myself. It seems to me that the feelings which come to us from Divine things are as purely natural as these, except that their source is nobler.... Worldly joys have their source in our own nature and end in God, whereas spiritual consolations have their source in God, but we experience them in a natural way....

If I began to weep over the Passion, I could not stop until I had a splitting headache; and the same thing happened when I wept for my sins. This was a great grace granted to me by Our Lord, and I will not for a moment examine each of these two favors and decide which is the better.... The tears and longings sometimes arise partly from our nature and from the state of preparedness we are in; but nevertheless... they eventually lead one to God.

Note also that distress of this kind is apt to be caused by weak health, especially in emotional people, who weep for the slightest thing; again and again they will think they are weeping for reasons which have to do with God but this will not be so in reality.

Do not let us suppose that if we weep a great deal we have done everything that matters.... Let the tears come when God is pleased to send them: we ourselves should make no efforts to induce them. They will leave this dry ground of ours well watered and will be of great help in producing fruit; but the less notice we take of them, the more they will do.

If we find ourselves in tears, it can be something God sends or God uses, or it can be something of purely human significance. Many people use up three tissues in a film, under cover of darkness. Any mother comes to allow for tears that are merely an attempt at manipulation, and God is not won over by the mere sight of tears (Malachi 2:13; Hebrews 12:17). They need to be an indication that something profound is going on or to be taken as a clue to something. They need to be an expression of true grief and not mere remorse, of true love and not of mere self-love.

Tears and Prayer

In scripture and in Christian history, tears have been a natural part of praying for other people, and of praying for oneself. They vividly express the complex interweaving of body, spirit, feelings, mind, and subconscious. Sometimes we may be aware that all five are working together. Sometimes tears well up for reasons that mind may not yet know.

In the prayers in Psalms, people draw attention to their own tears. There could of course be a danger that these tears have become self-conscious and calculated, but in letting these prayers appear in scripture, God is apparently prepared to take that risk. In these prayers people use all sorts of devices in seeking to gain God's attention to their pain and hurt, and drawing attention to their tears is one such device. "All night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears" and "crying has been my food and drink" (Psalms 6:6; 42:3) may seem exaggerations, but perhaps in the same way as "I cried my eyes out" or "I cried my heart out." If we are hurt, the Psalms assume, the natural thing is to cry; and if we are hurt before God, we cry before God and expect God to notice, as a child cries before its mother and expects her to notice (cf. Psalms 39:12; 56:8). Crying turns out to be one of the things we need to learn from children.

I have referred to an occasion when I found myself weeping for a student who had a particular pain in his life. There was probably a selfish element to those tears. I saw my own loss mirrored in his. I was weeping for myself as well as for him. But I *was* weeping for him, and my feeling of grief meant I was putting myself in his place and weeping with one who was weeping. When that happens to us, we are involved in intercession. As the Bible sees it, intercession involves standing in someone else's place and speaking for them, speaking as them, identifying with them. If I weep for them, I can ask God to preserve these tears too, to note these tears, even as I may ask God to note mine, to preserve mine, to be motivated by mine. Jeremiah was once referred to as the "weeping prophet," and that was what he himself wanted to be. He wanted to overflow unceasingly with tears for his own people because of the loss that their own sin had put them through and because this sin threatened to put them through more loss (see Jeremiah 9:1; 14:17). His tears accompany his pleading with God not to cast the people off, not to act as if despising them, not to keep afflicting them like the oppressors observed by Ecclesiastes who cause people to weep without self-consciousness or calculation because of their oppression (Ecclesiastes 4:1), not to abandon the covenant relationship with the people (Jeremiah 14:19-21).

Jeremiah's tears also accompany his verbalizing on the people's behalf of the confession of sin that is needed if God is to heed that prayer (14:20). Those tears over their sin are shed in their stead (they are tears they should shed). Other tears at their sin are shed because of his own grief at that sin and his awareness of where it will lead (13:17). Paul similarly weeps over the enemies of the cross of Christ (Philippians 3:18). In a parallel way he weeps when he faces people with ultimate questions in his preaching (Acts 20:19, 31; 2 Corinthians 4:4). When Jesus weeps over the city of Jerusalem, he takes up Jeremiah's ministry (Luke 19:41-44).

As we cannot have the joy of prayer answered without praying some prayers, so we cannot have the joy of tears wiped away without having shed some (cf. Luke 6:21). That applies both to tears on our own behalf and to tears we weep for others. But if we have shed some tears, then we can prove that those who sow in tears (not believing that there can ever be a harvest again, that the laughter of the past can ever be laughter in the present) do reap in joy (Psalm 126). And we can know that the sending of disaster that causes tears is not God's last word (see Isaiah 25:8, taken up in Revelation 7:17; 21:4).

Jesus' ministry shows that this wiping away of tears is not an experience for which we necessarily have to wait until the End. He acts on behalf of the weeping widow at Nain and therefore she can stop weeping (Luke 7:13). At Bethany he not merely tells people they have no need to weep; he first allows himself to be drawn into their weeping (John 11:31-35). He asks Mary Magdalene why she is weeping, and in addressing her by name wipes away her tears (John 20:11-16) (I mistyped that as "weeps away her tears," which bears thinking about).

20 Trust

As I write I am in the midst of my first serious exercise in trust for thirty years, since that time we had to decide to let Ann's pregnancy proceed. I am walking a plank or a tightrope with deep water below. Mark Knopfler has a great song called "Love Over Gold," which describes not only the person I might wish I was but in a way the person I have been forced to become over the past few months, pushed onto a high wire by God. The song is addressed to someone who walks out on the high wire and dances on thin ice without paying heed to the danger or to people's advice. She (I presume) goes dancing through doorways just to see what she will find, and embodies the need to value "love over gold" and throw caution to the wind. One should not be held back by the possibility that "things that you hold can fall and be shattered, or run through your fingers like dust."

Becoming Unsettled

A year ago I had a phone call from the Dean of the School of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, near Los Angeles. We had met four years previously in South Africa and I knew a number of the faculty at Fuller, and had talked about the possibility of my visiting there one day to teach a course or two. This can simply be an interesting thing to do in its own right, but it can be a way they have of testing out whether they might like to offer a post to someone, and I knew that they had an Old Testament post to fill. One of my senior colleagues happened to be with me when I took the call but I let it happen, thinking that it might do no harm if she and I talked about whether I ought to leave.

We eventually did that and she produced some not-very-convincing reasons for my staying. I had been Principal for nearly nine years, and at that stage I think I began to solidify in the expectation that ten years would likely be enough. We were involved in a major development project, and that time frame seemed likely to see the back of the associated fund-raising broken, which would seem a feasible time for a change. In the New Year I was still feeling settled enough to buy a new VCR and to join a new book club, yet I began to feel more rather than less unsettled. It began to seem that there were more pressing respects in which it would be good to have a change of principal sooner rather than later. As the seminary was developing in interesting ways but facing some pressing challenges, I believed it needed a differently-shaped person at the helm. And this meshed with my own feeling of tiredness with the responsibility. I had felt such tiredness before but had sensed God saying that I must gird up my loins and promising to be my strength, but this time I felt that God was giving me permission to give up.

A few weeks afterwards I heard a sermon from a bishop on the importance of not giving up, and I might have expected to be thrown by that, but instead I found myself reacting, "Yes, that's true in principle, but I know that God is saying something different to me at this moment."

One evening I expressed the unsettled-ness to a friend, and that helped hugely to make me feel settled about feeling unsettled and thus able to regain peace and joy in Christ. I began to solidify over the idea of visiting Fuller after Easter so that if they offered me a job and we liked it, I might agree to go and resign my post at St John's. But over the subsequent weekend I realized that I wanted to disassociate the two questions. Whether it was time to leave and where else we should go simply were two separate questions. From the St John's angle, if I resigned early in the year, it could get ahead with appointing my successor, with the prospect of a straight handover in the summer. I also felt it from my angle: these were actually separate questions, and once I had got clear on one, it seemed strange to make it depend on the other.

In the event, there was another advantage. St John's has been a lovely place for Ann. There are many people here who love her, and our house and garden are delights to her. If we had reached a point where I was asking the question, "Shall we leave here where Ann is at home and go to the U.S.A. where she does not want to go," it would have been hard to do the latter. Somehow handling the questions one by one made it easier.

The day I was writing to the St John's governing body and the faculty, a student wrote to me to say the things about community that I have quoted in chapter 5. I told another friend, who said it was odd, because he had been feeling for a while led to pray for us, without knowing why. I told one of Ann's carers, who said that her husband had been sensing a special impetus to pray for us, without knowing why. I took these events as signs that we had been surrounded by God's protection over the preceding weeks and that the decision to leave was right (which another friend pointed out to me was an important conviction against the possibility that things go wrong!).

A week later I was to tell the student body that I was intending to resign, and was feeling odd and behaving oddly. My friends would say that I always behave oddly; what I mean is that I was responding in illogical ways to things that happened or to things that people said, the way you do (or I do) when you are under stress or worried. I had to drive some distance to speak to a meeting; I sometimes find that a drive like that gives me opportunity for a long conversation with God in which I can work out things that have been going on. I realized four feelings were finding indirect expression in my odd behavior. I felt a failure for not being able to be the kind of principal St John's needs (and given the fact that this was not the ideal time for a change of Principal). I felt guilty for causing Ann to move when she would rather stay. I felt an anticipatory bereavement at the loss of people I love and who love me. And I was afraid of not finding others and of being alone. Being able to identify and name these feelings of course solved much of the problem, not least because I could argue with myself about them in the way Psalms 42 – 43 urge. You cannot argue until you have named. At the same time they remain the areas for which I am having to trust God as the move draws near.

Although the telephone call from Fuller played a key part in my deciding to resign, I could not assume that there was any certainty that we would go there, and I really had dissociated the two questions. Fuller were in parallel conversations with two or three other people about the post they wanted to fill. I did not know how the U.S. medical insurance system worked and I was not sure if it would be financially feasible for us to abandon the arms of the British National Health Service. Neither Fuller nor we could know if we were meant for each other until we had met properly. So I was trying to treat a move there as one possibility; it was no foregone conclusion.

When I resigning without knowing what I would do instead, this met reactions I was not prepared for. The student body seemed almost hurt, as well as stunned, as well as threatened. It was partly because almost by definition the students at a seminary are people who like it the way it is, and they have a perhaps-exaggerated idea of how far the Principal decides how it is. Admittedly I may underestimate how far that is so, not in the making of formal decisions where I may throw my weight about but in the end have only one vote, but in the setting of a style. And I remember that when I was being interviewed for the principalship I said I saw the post in terms of a guardianship of the college's relationship with God or of its spirituality, and if a person who has sought to focus on that goes, then that makes a difference. But perhaps a wife's leaving her husband for someone else is easier for him to understand than her leaving him because she simply wants a new start.

Senior clergy seemed threatened: as a bishop said to me, "in the Church of England you just do not resign one job until you have got the next," and himself drew the parallel with Abraham's going out not knowing whither he went. Indeed, one of my

colleagues had done that a year previously, resigning his post because he thought the time had come and because he thought he was about to be offered another; it gave me pause for thought that his possibility then fell through, though something else fine then emerged. "Are you really jumping off the cliff without a safety net?" my rector asked: to which the answer was, "Well, we could go and live with my mother and I could become a freelance theologian" (I had not asked my mother, though when I mentioned the possibility, she did start mentally reorganizing her house). Or I might be able to become a part-time rector and freelance theologian, and that might even enable me to continue to be a part-time Old Testament lecturer in some seminary that might need one.

Because there were safety nets, I did not feel that such a high degree of trust was required, and did not feel as Abrahamic as I came to feel later when we knew where we were going. In the event several job possibilities arose but the potential obstacles to going to Fuller looked as if they were melting away. A week before the visit I was invited to go for interview for one of these other possibilities, but I was clear that I was too committed to considering Fuller to agree to another post without going there, so I withdrew.

Writing a Letter

Soon there followed our college Quiet Day, when we have a guest who gives two or three talks and there is space in the rest of the day for people to do dealings with God. I normally go to the talks but I confess that I usually let the rest pass me by, but this time it seemed appropriate not to do so. The leader encouraged us to write a letters to God, and this is what I wrote.

I like the idea of writing to you, Father - it fulfils the function of getting it out of my head, but doing it in conversation with you, and you can comment.

I am excited about the possibility of going to Fuller. You know that last Tuesday we had that lovely evening with three people from Fuller who enabled us to have a much clearer picture of what it would be like, and that on Friday I had that amazing email from the Dean giving me encouraging responses to all my questions. It looks as if health care and housing and carers for Ann will not be a problem, and the job description places such an emphasis on research and writing. And I remembered that when I was articulating what I thought you were giving permission for in saying it was okay to leave here, I was instinctively putting it in terms of being free to be a "writer, priest/pastor, and teacher," and I thought the order must be wrong; an institution would be concerned that all I wanted was to write. But this does not seem to be so.

The instinct to put "pastor" second is interesting, and I commit myself to that order if the job does come off. Maybe that will help with the loneliness question which is now the chief thing I am a bit anxious about. I am visualizing Fuller as a bit like North Park [a seminary in Chicago that I had recently visited], with the seminary occupying the kind of space there that the university did, but with the restaurants and shops interwoven. It will be really nice if we can find a house within a few minutes of that (like the ones in North Park) so that I can push Ann there. I think you are encouraging me to hope.

The email made me feel a bit as if it was not only too good to be true, but too good to be right. I also remembered a sense that you were saying that enough was enough, that I had worked hard over the past decade with Ann and with college, and that you wanted me now to have an easier time and do what I wanted.

Although I had thus become clear that the order “writer, pastor, teacher” was significant, at the time I was not at all clear how being a pastor would work out. Once again the answer was obvious once I had seen it. I am involved in all three of these activities at present (my only problem is that “manager” is a prominent extra role). They are not three separate callings; they interweave. Writing is (at least sometimes) an expression of pastoring and a byproduct of pastoring. Writing feeds teaching and is fed by it. Teaching feeds pastoring and is fed by it. The nature of British seminary life has always encouraged that interweaving. What God is commissioning is that I should become even more systematically one who makes the study of scripture in the classroom something that feeds life with God, and encourages students to treat me as a pastor. U.S. seminaries are victims of a split between mind and relationship with God, and I have the instincts and the experience to encourage these two to be brought together.

The letter also involved giving to God people (whom I was concerned about, whom we will miss), situations (such as the future of St John’s), weaknesses and temptations (such as needs I am aware of, and the possibility that we will either have not enough money, or too much), and hopes (that the post at Fuller will work out, that there will be happiness in the future for me and for Ann). (I had not had the faith to ask God to make Ann happy to go to the U.S.A., but before we went for our visit she was talking as if she wanted to – or was at least saying it was exciting even if she would really prefer to stay here. In soccer terms, her order of preference of places to live was:

Premier League: Nottingham [that is, no change].

First Division: California, Texas, Cambridge, London, Cape Town.

Second Division: Sheffield, Scotland, Birmingham, Coventry, Melbourne, Chicago.

We flew to Los Angeles on Easter Tuesday, April 1. During our first night, after a couple of hours’ sleep I was wide awake at 1.00 a.m. (it was well after getting-up-time by my body-clock). I got up and started to read the tourist information on Los Angeles that the seminary had kindly left for us and found myself instantly disenchanted with the prospect of Hollywood, Beverley Hills, and Palm Beach. Glamour became tackiness; I did not want to come to live here. (I eventually realized that Pasadena itself is a self-contained community with its own shops, cinemas, theatres, and music, so that if we want to keep out of L.A., we can do so.) I wondered what we were doing there at all and how we could get for out of coming.

Yet what coolly emerged over the next few days was that the job there was right for me and the place was one where God had been ahead checking out for us. If there was somewhere where I could be writer, pastor, and teacher, this was it. I had feared that the theological atmosphere was narrower than that at St John’s, but I felt very much at home. The people were lovely, even if I allowed for the fact that (as someone put it) people in the U.S.A. are better at being friendly than at being friends. I could see some of them “falling in love with Ann,” as I think of it.

I Have Been Here Before

On the Friday we were to be taken around some possible houses by the realtor or estate agent I mentioned in chapter 12. She took us to three or four single-story houses, which was just what I had said we wanted, but my heart sank as I entered each one. I could not see us in any of them. They had the kind of tricky doorways and turns that make it difficult to see how Ann and the wheelchair would get round, and they needed

now and/or would need on an ongoing basis work on house and garden that I lack the time or the instinct to do.

Then she took us to an apartment in a three-storey condominium (so called because you are sharing ownership of the block). I do not know why she did that, because we had said we wanted a house. Even as we walked through the lobby with its sitting-out area, cool and open to the sky, I felt at home and could see us there. It was immediately easy to push the wheelchair round the open-plan flat itself. There was a study-area which was semi-separate from the lounge, a deliberately-designed version of the way we had arranged things at our present home, so that I can be with Ann but be working (fingers in ears when interesting television coincides with something I need to think hard about).

Then we walked into the bathroom and there was a walk-in shower of the kind we have had installed in our present home, and I half-saw the hand of God pointing, and half-heard God saying "Do you see?": which I took to mean, "I have been here before, I knew this was here, it's for you." I say "half-saw" and "half-heard" because at the time it seemed naive and too risky even to think that that might be what was going on, but as weeks passed I gained confidence in believing that this was for us. It seemed significant that the vendor was an Anglican (a rarer thing in the U.S.A. than in Britain) who was glad to be selling to someone in Christian ministry, and was willing to drop the price by \$15,000. It seemed significant that the condo stayed on the market for the period of weeks until I was offered a job and accepted it; subsequently another sold at a higher price within five days.

Ann coped well with the journey and if anything moved a little easier than she had been doing in Britain. This confirmed the possibility that the climate would be good for her. A few months previously when Fuller had invited me to discuss the possibility of a post, I had said that Ann could hardly come to somewhere as hot. The Dean, whose sister-in-law has multiple sclerosis, pointed out that California has a desert climate - sunny and hot but with low humidity. We already knew that suited Ann. We have been for a number of holidays in the Alps because there you get warm sun but low humidity. On the first occasion there, when Ann could get about with just a cane, she was upset when we got home because she could walk in the Alps and not back in Nottingham.

After we returned to Britain, the seminary had to go through the rest of its procedures, which included considering the two other possible candidates. We also had to do some thinking. Although the salary would be much higher than my present one, our outgoings would also be much higher, and I needed to check that we could make the finances work. I also needed to think about other aspects of care for Ann.

Before visiting Pasadena, I had been for a talk with our doctor about the future for Ann. As I knew, there was no way he could predict how things would be for Ann in particular; multiple sclerosis is too variable. But one inference I drew from the conversation was that there was no reason Ann should not live as long as I do. The point he wanted to press was that it was very likely that she would in due course need nursing home care. No matter how much I wanted to do so, I would not be able to look after her at home. I do not want to accept this, but I could see I had to take his advice seriously and say things to Fuller about the kind of provision she might need.

One Wednesday, nearly three weeks' after our return, we had a time of seeking God in college chapel, and God told one of our students "Tell John 'Judges 18.6.'"" "I don't know what it says," Petra replied, "and I haven't got a Bible." (Never go to church without a Bible!). "Never mind," said God, "just tell him 'Judges 18.6.'"" Later in the corridor Petra pressed into my hand a scrap of paper bearing this reference and told me the story. "Judges 18? That's the story of the Levite's concubine being cut into twelve pieces, isn't it?" I said. "I hope not," she replied (actually that is Judges 19, though as a whole Judges 18 is fairly tough stuff, too). We both went home to look it up. In the NIV

it reads "Go in peace. Your journey has the LORD's approval." The NRSV has "Go in peace. The mission you are on is under the eye of the LORD." I checked the Hebrew, which says more literally "Go in peace. The road on which you are going is before Yahweh." It reminds me now of that sense that God had checked out 111 South Orange Grove ahead of us. The word for "before" is a rare one. The dictionary explains that in contexts such as this it means "under Yahweh's eye and favorable regard."

It was the next day that I received an email offering me the job at Fuller and making a commitment with regard to Ann which did not leave me without risk but reduced that risk to something I ought to be prepared to accept. It felt a "defining moment," as one of my colleagues put it," though I felt quite cold about it. I gained no pleasure or sense of excitement such as I had felt in the spring term about the prospect. But I could not get out of the sense of being carried on a conveyer-belt to it - not merely by Fuller but by events as a whole, and by God. It was odd that I felt so cold, though I did not mind. Perhaps there was too much to feel.

I printed out the message, wandered about with it that day, and slept on it, though I knew there was only one response I could make. In the meantime, that evening I went to pray with three friends, and one prayed not for pleasure but for joy. Next day after chapel I went to the computer again and typed a short note of acceptance. As I paused before I pressed the "Send" key, intending perhaps to think and pray one more time, a colleague came in to ask me about something. We had a brief conversation and I turned back to the keyboard. I found that actually I had pressed the "Send" key without noticing. It was too late for further thoughts. That somehow seemed right and typical. All through this had been something that God and other people were in charge of. That was so even at the point of saying "Yes."

The same afternoon we had a corporate time of prayer in college as as we began in worship I was overwhelmed with a joy in praising God. On Friday evening it was the college revue, which we enjoyed, and I sang "Route 66," the song popularized in Britain by the Rolling Stones, about the road from Chicago to Los Angeles via Pasadena; our house is three blocks off it. I danced a bit but realized that my heart was not really in it and wandered off homewards.

The set readings and prayers that Sunday were just for me. We prayed to God who can bring order to our unruly wills and passions. We heard God promising to turn desolation into beauty. We heard God knocking at the door seeking to be let in. We heard God asking "Do you love me more than these?" (e.g. these books).

Over the next few weeks, for most of the time I had to concentrate too much on college matters to worry too much about the future. There were funny things that happened. For a while it seemed that we were caught in a kind of catch 22. Our mortgage broker wanted us to sign documents at the US embassy in London during June. Our immigration attorney wanted us go nowhere near the embassy about our loan before we had a visa. By the time we had a visa it would be too late for the loan. Or we could find ourselves losing both loan and visa.... In due course these two questions became unlinked and the house purchase was going through. I wired our payment to the agent. The money failed to arrive. The seminary bursar asked for reference numbers to enable them to chase the transaction. That week a landing on Mars was being orchestrated from Pasadena; the college joke was that we had unintentionally bought real estate there. By the time I had these, it was Independence Day and everyone had gone on holiday for a long weekend. But after the weekend the money reappeared from cyberspace, the sale went through, and we were owners of a condominium in California. I could imagine how nice it would be to be able to push Ann in the wheelchair to the city to restaurants, cinemas, and shops (we can go nowhere by wheelchair-push here). I could imagine how nice it might be to picnic by the condo's pool.

Of course for some reason we might not get visas; we would be owning a property in the U.S.A. but unable to enter the country to earn the money to pay for it. Indeed, the embassy initially refused our visa application; Ann's photograph was too small. Fortunately in due course it transpired that this was their biggest problem with us, and we had the visas. Then I really believed we were going.

From time to time I fretted about Ann. We had warm spring weather and our garden looked lovely; I could not imagine her enjoying looking out on our patio in Pasadena in the same way. I had to give that to God, believing the signs of God's involvement. From time to time I was overwhelmed by the stress of all the questions. It was from now on that I was to feel recurrently that I had never felt so pushed out in faith, having to trust in demanding circumstances. What if we did not find the companions we needed to look after Ann? What might issue from the fact that we did not really know how the system works in the U.S.A. and what it will deliver? What if I am unable to cope physically? What if I am unable to cope emotionally: I will feel so alone. One Sunday I told our churchwarden that the thing that scared me most was loneliness and she said one had to remember that the fact that you were not with people did not mean that they had stopped loving you; I have to remember that. But more profoundly I have to remember that God has directed us there, God had been there before and looked, and that every week God gives us an encouragement, a sign of love, provision, and divine sense of humor.

By then the stakes had got raised. During the summer term Ann had been getting less mobile and in late June had relapse of her ms. She could no longer stand at all and her catheter system no longer worked. She was admitted to her rehabilitation center for four week and came out less mobile than she was when she went in. This markedly changed the nature of the task of caring for her. I learned to use a "hoist" and discovered that the nicer term in U.S. English is patient-lift, but the medics are uncertain about how to handle the catheter problem and it seems Ann will be getting wet from time to time. Apart from being unpleasant for Ann and tricky if we are out (let alone on an aircraft for eleven hours), that threatens skin problems. So how will we cope here, and how cope there? Neither Fuller nor I have a bottomless purse to cover possible nursing costs. And all this heightens the pressure of the fact that we are moving away from the people who love us and whom we love. I have realized that half-an-hour's conversation with someone like that is part of what keeps me going: what will replace it?

What Can I Trust God For?

So what does trust mean? What can I trust God for? There have been all those signs that God is taking us from the U.K. to the U.S.A., and in a dream I can imagine that everything will be wonderful. We will get the companions. We will get the health care. Ann's catheter system will work, or we will find some other arrangement. I will be able to walk her into the town for a film or ice-cream or shopping. We will attract the squirrels and birds onto our patio. But then I am making the mistake of trying to imagine a neat future by analogy with the present, the way you have to when you think of heaven. It is a mistake, but it is all you can do. I have to remind myself that in this new situation, things working out well and in a way that makes Ann happy will be different and is by definition unimaginable. All I can do is imagine re-creating what works here; "working well" there will probably be quite different.

There was a much tougher fact that I had to remind myself of. There have been all those signs that God is taking us from the U.K. to the U.S.A., yet I am hesitant to believe that God is promising us a rose garden, that they imply that everything is bound to be well. Somehow things do not necessarily work out that way. After all, we sought to be

sure that our marrying in the first place was God's will, but this has not stopped its being tough. Lots of people who seek God's will regarding who they marry end up divorced.

So what is one entitled to expect? What does God's faithfulness consist in? I suppose that my own experience has been that each extra bit of pressure has been but the harbinger of another one. God treats me rather the way a trainer treats a weight-lifter. The satisfaction you get is not that of now being able to give up lifting weights. Succeeding at one weight simply qualifies you to try the next. When the possibility of going to Pasadena first arose, it felt like a gift, like the trainer's permission to rest. At the moment it feels more like the context in which to lift some more weights. The faithfulness of God consists in not requiring you to lift what will break your back; the promise is that God does not let us be tested beyond our strength. That is my bottom-line trust. I trust that in personal ways things will not be overwhelming, that I will be able to carry the inner burden, and that in financial ways things will not be overwhelming.

One night after I had been away for the day, on getting back to Nottingham I went to see Ann in the rehabilitation center in the late evening. She was in bed, and greeted me with a surprised smile. I had written on her message board that I would be there late and had asked the nurses to remind her; perhaps they had done so, but she forgets. She had had no visitors (on her account, but she forgets that too). I had asked God to send someone, but there had apparently been no-one, but her contentedness seemed to make that not matter. On the way out the charge nurse caught me to ask one or two things and then talked about how wonderful it was that we were going to the U.S.A. and how wonderful Ann was. She told me how much they had been laughing in the afternoon as they had been getting her to bed with the hoist, and how wonderful her sense of humor was. I came home crying but content, as I often am, feeling that for me and for Ann God had not done what I asked, but had ministered to me and to her in ways that made that okay.

Two weeks later Ann came home. For 24 hours it seemed that looking after her was all there was time to do. I got up with some sense of hopelessness the next day, when she had been home for 36 hours. In the post I found a "bon voyage" card to us from a former student. It was embroidered on the front with a boat bearing the stars and stripes and our initials, all superimposed by the cross. Inside it talked about what college had meant to this person and the blessings that had come through Ann's illness. The day before I had been reading 2 Corinthians 4 because I had to preach on it a week or two later: "death is at work in us, but life in you." That has been Ann's story. And mine, in a way (though in mine I can see life at work as well; I have to trust God to work that out for Ann).

That night one of my dreads happened. Ann needed to go to the toilet in the evening when I was on my own. I was not at all sure how on earth we could manage this, but it was okay.

Later that night I had a dream. Near our home there is a six-lane road with a complicated junction to take you towards where we live. At the moment the road is being repaired and only four of six lanes are open. As you drive along you switch from one lane to another, sometimes with holes and barriers on one side, sometimes on the other. In my dream the junction itself was under reconstruction and I was travelling through it on the bus. There was only the narrowest of carriageways through the roadworks and the surface was not made up. Indeed, the carriageway was not actually wide enough for the bus, and crumbled down on either side into deep gulfs. It was like a nightmare version of French, or even more of Israeli, roadworks. But the bus just made its way briskly and confidently through the junction and on towards our home. I am taking that as God's promise regarding the journey we were about to undertake. Later I discovered that when God

promises to make the way of the righteous smooth, in Isaiah 29, the word for “way” is the word for a cart-track, and cart-tracks are pretty uneven, like Israeli roadworks.

There came a time when every day there seemed to be another goodbye, that time when every time we say goodbye they took a little part of us and we died a little. These were people who were themselves grieved (even angry) that we were going. With them all there were words or just gestures which made it clear that we were loved and would be missed. And because I am still rather dazed by the idea of being loved, that has the more of an impact. On our farewell Sunday at our church one of our churchwardens gave us a card with the promise “God is not a deceiver that he should offer to support us and then when we lean upon him should slip away from us.” And on the congregational farewell card our vicar copied out an inscription in Welsh which he had seen in St David’s Cathedral in Wales, “Bydd gytiawn ac nad ofna.” Although he is Welsh, he claimed not to understand it – or rather, because he is Welsh, he claimed it was untranslatable – but he eventually agreed that it meant something like “Be whole without fear.” We have to trust and be that.

When God Writes on Our Hearts

I wrote all that before we left but have recast it in the past tense as we have now been in Pasadena for a few months. I felt before we left that God’s own trustworthiness was on the line, and that because God had put it there.

If things went wrong, God would be in more of a mess than I would. But over the past twenty weeks God has proved that that trustworthiness is real. Indeed, I have to say that the way God has proved trustworthy over the twenty weeks since we came here has gone far beyond my dreams. We have had lots of little crises but none that God has not taken us through to the other side of and then smiled lovingly and said, “You see, it turned out OK, didn’t it?” I have felt that being here as just a professor is an even more wonderful relief from the stress of being in charge than I imagined. Ann has moved from “I don’t want to go” to “It’s better here than I expected” to “I like America more than England,” and that is something I would not have dared pray for.

Half-way through the first term, one Tuesday in a time of informal worship, someone prayed that God would guard what God had written on our hearts, and next morning I wrote down some of those things to God, those things that God had written on my heart, again almost like a letter. Some of what I wrote then, and have added since, is:

- You love me like a protector with warmth and affection and steel.
- This is the right place for me and it will be a place of refreshment.
- I am to give myself and will then find myself.
- You have given me the vocation of living with Ann’s illness, and I accept it.
- You want me to prove that living with loss isn’t incompatible with living with joy, and I accept that too, enthusiastically.

At the beginning of our second term I was asked to give a testimony in chapel, and I told people something of this story. At the end of the service a student came up to me and told me how in the worship part he had been given a picture of a man standing washing dishes, looking out over a garden, and of God saying, “I have heard you.” As I spoke he knew the picture was for me. As we wept on each other’s shoulders, I knew that this was not me here in Pasadena (where I wash dishes facing a wall!) but me in Nottingham where I indeed washed dishes facing the garden, with its fruit trees and birds and squirrels, which Ann and I both loved. I knew that the picture was true, though only as I write do I realize its significance. I believed then that God was listening and that God

would make things work out, but by the nature of the case this had to be faith not sight. Now it was sight, and God was once again saying (in love, not in rebuke), “Do you see? I was listening, wasn’t I?” I shall probably realize something else tomorrow, but I have to post this disk....

Of course I am still working to trust God for the longer-term issues. Trusting does not have an end, even in heaven (see I Corinthians 13:13)?

That was the end of the first edition of this book. Some of my friends would say it is just like me to end with a question mark, so I was glad I was able to do it.

21 Turbulence

In the late 1960s we used to watch the “Rowan and Martin Laugh-In”—I think it was on late Sunday nights, just right for an unwinding pastor. It proclaimed with pride and irony that it came from beautiful Downtown Burbank—I could tell this was a joke, but now I live just along the freeway from the studios and appreciate more fully the irony. One of its regular items carried the tag line “What do you want first, the good news or the bad news?”

The turbulence of our life is that it keeps alternating the two. Here are one week’s recollections.

- Ann has an infection—we had better transfer her to the hospital
- But she should be there only for two or three days
- But after that, shouldn’t you really let her be in a nursing home?
- But if you want to keep her at home, we can offer you more support there
- She has pneumonia
- Her temperature is down today
- Would you want us to resuscitate her if her heart stops?
- She is doing better—we can transfer her from the acute ward to the Transitional Care Unit
- Her temperature is up again
- Her temperature is down again
- She ought to go to a skilled nursing facility after hospital
- But she should be able to come home after that
- You shouldn’t assume she will ever recover—should her sons come to say goodbye?
- There’s no need for her to go to a skilled nursing facility—we can send a nurse to your home.
- Her temperature is up again
- She will be able to come home tomorrow
- We’ve found out why the temperature has been going up—she has more fluid in her lungs
- But the antibiotics should solve that—it just may take a bit longer

At about that time, someone commented to me that it must be wearing to go through a bereavement that takes years to happen. If we could know Ann would live for two weeks or two months or two years, I could get on with handling that. The wearing thing is the roller-coaster nature of the process we actually have to live with, the anticipating of a death that never comes, the resolving of one problem that is then just succeeded by another. Actually, I do not really believe she will ever die—she will just go on dying for ever. I think of her life and death in terms of the curve on a differential

calculus graph. It keeps getting ever nearer the base line, and you keep thinking it must reach it, yet by definition it never ever does so. But I realized that I was ready to let her go, which was not the case a while ago. That was partly because I was not sure who I would be without her, but I am readier to discover that now. And it was partly because I was afraid of a seamless transition from “I can accept her dying” to “I want her to die,” but I seem to be out of the other side of that snare.

The Last 100 Days?

In the last fall of the old millennium, I began to wonder whether Ann was dying. When we visited California in connection with the possibility of moving here, she could still get across a room with the help of a walking frame. During that visit, when we looked at the apartment that seemed designed for us (and where I saw God’s hand confirming this), there seemed only one thing unfitting about it: it had long-pile carpet that Ann would never be able to negotiate. But by the time we moved, she could not walk at all, and this became irrelevant.

She could still lift a sandwich to her mouth, but over the next year she lost this ability. At the same time, as well as finding thinking and remembering harder, she was talking less. Over the subsequent year, she found it more and more difficult to swallow. No matter how long she chewed, her swallowing reflex would fail to operate. Indeed, a spitting reflex sometimes came into play instead, with amusing if messy results. Once I smacked her instinctively when that happened, as if she were a naughty child. I suppose I thought that somehow all this must be under her control, just as years before I had once or twice got annoyed when she could not control her bladder.

Sometimes she would fail to take in medicines, and she was not drinking anywhere near enough liquids. She stopped drinking coffee, one of her great delights ever since I first knew her. She was taking in nowhere near enough nutrition. I could feed her continuously from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., but she could sit for ten or twenty minutes chewing the same mouthful of food. Once I found a whole mushroom in her mouth at teeth-cleaning time. She was visibly losing weight. Eventually she reached a point when she was hardly talking at all. If we got “Yes” or “No” out of her three times in a day, we were doing well (if she spoke as much as that now, another two years later, it would seem wonderful).

Worse, sometimes she would look vague, or look past us as if not seeing us. She seemed to be losing control of her smile, the last physical movement she did control, though she still managed a slight response to a child or a cat or a hyacinth or a familiar face. Her head would shake from side to side, but this did not mean she was signifying something. Sometimes she would drop off to sleep in the middle of a meal. Sometimes she would cry out inarticulately, and I did not know whether this was because she was in pain, or because she perhaps wanted to clear her throat and could not do so, or because she was frustrated that she could not formulate something to articulate, or just because she was in distress at how things were. Whatever it was, I could do nothing about it.

And I began to wonder whether she was dying. Obviously I knew that eventually she would die, but until this time I had assumed that she might go on living as a disabled person for years. Although it had been painful watching her lose her freedom and her capacities and her mobility, we enjoyed our life together. Indeed I found it hard to imagine things being any other way (as I found it hard to remember how they had been when she was not so reduced by the illness). While she grieved over the loss of the ability to work as a psychiatrist and to do things for herself, she was reasonably content. She was loved and well-looked-after by two carers who were with her for much of the day, especially when I was at work. She had been used to appreciating simple things such as

eating ice cream by the pool and watching the birds and laughing at the Britcom *Keeping up Appearances*, and she especially enjoyed visits from students who came to our apartment. I had been able to imagine that continuing for years.

Suddenly it was harder to imagine, in two senses. I did not like thinking about it, because the progress of the illness had all-but taken away those remaining aspects of life that gave life some enjoyment. And it seemed that she was fading away and was hardly likely to survive much longer. I had never really understood what it was that people with MS die of, but I began to realize that it was the things that people die of in old age. They may catch some infection from which they fail to recover, or they may simply fade away and die. A friend in Britain with MS had died a few months previously. She had simply died in her sleep. I began to listen for Ann's breathing in the night, and to wonder each morning when I got up whether she would still be alive.

One of the results of getting insufficient nourishment is that your skin can begin to break down, and Ann had increasing trouble with pressure sores. The one on her butt refused to heal. Indeed, sitting all that time trying to eat meant it got worse rather than better. For other parts of the day I would lie her on her side on the sofa to relieve the pressure. I could not see how we could do anything by way of going out (for instance, to movies or friends') without it getting worse. I gave away to a student and his wife our tickets to a concert by the great blues artist Keb Mo (and the student kept telling me what a great concert it was, until I got him to believe that I did not wish to know). I began to spend the evenings sitting on the carpet by the sofa where Ann lay, just to be with her, thinking that a day would come when I would look back on these weeks as the last weeks of her life.

One afternoon while lying like that, she had a little seizure, the first she had had for several years. It just meant her eyes flickered in odd ways and her face distorted. Afterwards she started being able to talk and swallow a bit, as if the seizure had shaken her system into functioning again. I had feared she had withdrawn from me and turned her face to the wall to die, but I took it that this meant she had not. She had come back. This only lasted a few days but it seemed precious, a gift of God's grace. These felt like some days in which to say goodbye, though we did not exactly do that, and later I realized that it was too late to have an actual conversation about her dying—a conversation in which she took part.

One day the nurse came to change Ann's catheter. She then routinely takes Ann's blood pressure, pulse beat, and so on. This time she reckoned that Ann's blood pressure was 240 over 120 – twice the normal. She bade us get straight down to "Immediate Care," the walk-in surgery with most of the facilities of an ER. Oddly, they then measured Ann's blood pressure as 60 over something that did not register – half the normal, but just as worrying. The problem was apparently that she was dehydrated, because of not being able to swallow enough liquids, and consequently also de-oxygenated. This would also be one reason for her inclination to fall asleep. They put her on oxygen and a saline I.V. and over a couple of hours her blood pressure was up to normal.

I think they implied that she had been in danger of dying. Indeed, the doctor, a wonderful, kind, diminutive Chinese American, asked what they were to do if one day she stopped breathing. How "aggressive" did I want them to be in seeking to bring her back to life? This was not something they expected to arise today, now that she was getting treatment for her low blood pressure, but it might arise one day, and they would need to know the answer. It was something I needed to talk to Ann about. What would she want? I wept, partly because the idea of talking to her about the question seemed daunting. The doctor and the Christian nurse we often meet there comforted me, and commented on how well-looked-after they thought Ann was, and how she always looked good when we took

her there. Actually they commented on how “clean” Ann is, reminding me of people’s comments about Paul McCartney’s grandfather in *A Hard Day’s Night*.

When the nurse had told us to get Ann to Immediate Care quickly, I had simply done so, without a sense of panic. The sequence of events reminded me of an occasion two months previously when she had fallen out of her wheelchair just outside our apartment. Unable to reach out to break her fall, she had hit her head on the concrete, and blood had gushed out. At the time I was able to be quite cool in handling the situation, though again I wept in the hospital, and over the next few days the awfulness of the event kept coming home. I kept seeing Ann falling. I kept reliving that split second when she was on her way from wheelchair to concrete and there was not time to get round to catch her. I kept feeling the thud as her head hit the ground (and marveling that no more damage was done). This time as I sat by her bed, I reflected on the strangeness of sitting waiting to discover whether they can pluck your wife back from death, and on the strangeness of not being a panicky person.

We were two months away from the end of the millennium, and we were looking forward to a New Year visit from our two sons and their wives and our grandson, whom Ann had not seen. I began to wonder whether Ann would even live that long, though in less gloomy moments I imagined she would do so, and I was extremely grateful that we were to have this time together. A year or so previously, as we had sat in an outdoor restaurant near our apartment, one of our daughters-in-law had suddenly declared, “This is where I wish to see in the new millennium,” and had gone off to reserve a table for ten. So that was how it had come about that we were all to be together. I could not imagine Ann alive through to another Christmas/New Year. It was great that we would have what I thought would be this last time of celebration together.

In the November, Ann’s neurologist decided to try giving Ann a course of steroids, a variant on the treatment that used to work so well at earlier stages of the illness. I would need to get her to Immediate Care for three hours a day for five days. During the second treatment, she began talking again, and talked all day. It was another gift of grace. Then, within hours of finishing the course, she was thoroughly back to where she was before it—and it is not the kind of thing you can have on a regular basis, I think because steroids rot your bones. Only occasionally, again, could she signify “Yes” or “No,” or smile. Once or twice a day she uttered a clause.

I wondered how I could minister to her in her silence, but I did not think she was lonely. One night she was articulate for a few moments in bed. I had settled her down and she had dropped off to sleep but I had then accidentally woken her again, and just after waking is often a moment when she will be articulate. I had been wondering about whether she really enjoyed the things that we do, such as going out for ice cream and going to movies and concerts, so I asked her about some recent such ventures and whether she had liked them, and each time she said “Yes.” As I was thinking, “But maybe that’s some kind of automatic reaction,” she added, “I enjoy everything”—which was the way it looked.

It was not exactly the way it *looked*, because she now lacked most of the body language to indicate how she was feeling. I often tell people not to be put off by that, as if it implies she does not welcome their attention and their words. But it was occasional conversations like the one that I have just described that told me that she does enjoy things. If I hold her hand I get no response—evidently she has no awareness of feeling of that. But if I stroke her neck or rub my cheek on her cheek, I still get a smile. And I get a laugh whenever I do something funny, such as fall over or stub my toe.

But I began to think in terms of these being “The Last Hundred Days.” It was a figure of speech: although I felt that Ann was fading faster than she had done before, I had no idea how long the literal time frame would be. When we celebrated her birthday in

November, I could not imagine ever doing so again, and when we celebrated Thanksgiving (or whatever British people do on the last Thursday in November), I could not imagine her being alive next Thanksgiving. And I began to think about her funeral. There should be pictures of her there, not least for people who did not know her when she was more alive. We should play the Beatles' *All My Loving*, which she used to sing when she was a student, when she went to see if there was a letter from me. Her beloved Simon Rattle, the former conductor of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, should feature (an excerpt from Mahler's Resurrection Symphony?). The Van Gogh sunflowers, her favorite painting should be there. And afterwards, I would like to scatter her ashes in Dovedale in the Derbyshire Dales in England, where we began our honeymoon.

That evening I started the medicines routine at 10 and found she could not swallow at all. I would put things in her mouth and they would just stay there. But she was still alert—she knew what was going on. So I told her that I wondered if she was dying and that I was sorry we had not talked about dying and funerals, and I told her what I was thinking about that. I *think* she smiled slightly when I included the Beatles. She was then able to swallow.

Then we saw a gastro-enterologist, who agreed to fix Ann with a gastric feeding tube, but said it would be weeks before he could do so. That afternoon, lunch dribbled out of Ann's mouth from 2.30 till 7. Then at 10 she started swallowing and took 1½ cans of nutrition and started talking, so we talked till 12. (She even asked for a drink of water in bed.) A day or two later, the gastro-enterologist found Ann an appointment *next day* instead of mid-December.

The inserting of it was as straightforward as they said it would be, and as soon as she began to get proper nutrition she began to do better, and the sores started to heal. The eighteen months since have been a kind of bonus, like the postponement of an execution.

Admittedly from time to time I continue to wonder whether she has died. I did so the next month, the morning one of our sons was due to arrive from England, with his wife and baby. After I got up I wondered whether perhaps Ann was not breathing and had not noticed. If she is dead, what will we do today? They must be above Iceland now, with Daniel fulfilling Steven's nightmares, crawling up and down the aisle, and Steven himself has a nasty cold.... Should we send someone to meet them at the airport, to tell them? Could we keep Ann's body here all day, till they arrive? Is that legal? What do you do when someone dies, anyway? There seems little point in calling 911.

Then she cried out and coughed. So she was alive.

That same October I was invited to join a group of faculty and chaplains working through the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. It felt like a gift from God at this turbulent stage in my life, something that would give me a fresh framework for doing dealings with God over these months. Because I was doing the Exercises at this point in my life, it involved an interaction with the shape of my coping with Ann's illness and decline. What follows in this chapter, like some material earlier in this book, comes from my journaling of the process.

Mark 9:14-29

If you are able!! There are disturbing similarities between Ann and the boy whom the remaining disciples cannot heal when Jesus is away being transfigured in the company of the three leading disciples. The story concerns someone who has been ill for years, who is unable to speak. The person to whom he meant so much and on whom he was utterly dependent brought him to Jesus' disciples but they could do nothing. Ann, too, has a spirit that prevents her from speaking. She, too, would fall over if I did not hold her up.

Or she goes mysteriously rigid. (It is not really mysterious—it is what the medics strangely call “tone,” because etymologically the word means “tension.” Quite often it works in our favor, especially when I am on my own when dressing Ann and her legs go stiff so that she bears her own weight as I pull up her pants.) Food dribbles out of her mouth, too. She chews incessantly on the mucus that her glands produce. She falls out of her wheelchair and her blood stains the pavement outside our apartment. She cannot drink so she gets dehydrated and de-oxygenated and she falls asleep with food in her mouth, in the midst of trying to eat.

There are differences from Mark’s story. We have not assumed that a demon has done these things to Ann (I do not imply that we therefore have more or less insight: I do not know how to look at that question). The theologians have been on our side, oh yes, they have. We have lived among theologians for thirty years, and they have loved us, and prayed with us, and grieved with us, and puzzled with us, and never ever spoken harsh words to us. And for us Jesus does not come back from the mountain. He stays in heaven transfigured. He knows what is going on but does nothing – nothing by way of confronting this spirit of incapacity and dumbness.

It arouses some challenges from me. I want to answer Jesus back when he addresses the disciples or the crowd or the theologians or the victims of the illness as a faithless generation with whom he does not wish to spend more time than is absolutely necessary. I want to answer him back when he picks up the father’s words to him, “If you are able.” It does not seem an unreasonable phrase. Jesus seems so hard. I want to say, “If you *are* able, let’s have some pity and some support instead of this aggressiveness. I do believe you have the power, so how about using it?”

I want to answer him back when he suggests that people will get healed if we pray. It is but one of the gaps and illogicalities in the story—after all, for all that closing line declaring that “this kind only comes out by prayer,” we have not been told that Jesus prayed. Maybe that is a parable of how little we know. And the whole story is reminiscent of God’s speech in Job, reminding Job that he is not the center of the universe and that he is not going to be told the answers to his questions. Like Job, the man and his son are just minor players in a drama, one involving Jesus and the disciples and the scribes and the evil powers. And so Ann and I are just minor players in a drama. And perhaps this helps me to see where comfort lies in the story. (Am I wrong to seek comfort in the story? Should I have been content just to face the desolation? Facing the “desolation” or personal sorrow or pain or guilt that sometimes comes from studying scripture is an important aspect of Ignatian meditation. Should I have stayed with it? Well, tough.)

The comfort is that the way God may reach out to you may vary according to your place in the drama, but God does reach out to you. God did that with people who had a very tough time, such as Job or Saul, and he does it with this man and his son, and he does it with Ann and me—well with me, and I trust with Ann. Everybody gets used, but only in a way that will also bring some meaning and some consolation to them somehow. In chapel yesterday, one of my seminary colleagues, a professor of psychology, preached a sermon about happiness. She reminded us of the research that indicates that (for instance) a good job or good health is not the thing that makes people happy. Not long after a promotion or the loss of a job, a successful operation or falling to some handicap, the person is back to the level of happiness they were at before. I would not necessarily be happier, nor would Ann, because Ann was healthy. It is hard to believe in a way, though also easy to believe. I am at least as happy as I have ever been, and insofar as I am unhappy, it is not (directly) because of Ann’s illness. And Ann is as content as she would otherwise have been—perhaps more so.

But I want to ask Mark some questions, as well as Jesus. Why did you tell us stories like this, about someone being healed like this, when you must also know well that

in most other people's lives sick people don't get healed? Would it not be better if these stories were not there?

One of the keys to Ignatian meditation is identifying imaginatively with characters in a passage. This story is one especially rich in characters – Jesus, the three who had seen him transfigured, the crowd, the theologians, the boy, the demon, the other disciples. I imagine my way through the story several times, in the company of this cast.

- There is Jesus. You go down from spiritual heights to urgent need, conflict, and your people's failure. His questions and his unreasonable challenges make him so human.
- There are the three who were with him. You, too, go from spiritual heights to urgent need, conflict, and a situation where you know you also would have failed, but a sense that you should have been there.
- There are the other disciples. They are fearful. They are overwhelmed by the crowd and by the man in his pain and by the boy in his disability and by the theologians who are spoiling for a fight (especially in the absence of Jesus with his sharp mind and tongue) and by their own failure. The whole experience is a nightmare that only gets bleaker when Jesus returns.
- There are the theologians. They argue about the way healing comes and whether there is sin to be confessed (because it is much easier to understand illness if you can attribute it to sin). They wish it could be true that healing were possible, they fear it might be true, they are sad that the disciples cannot do what their teacher could, they are relieved that the disciples cannot do what their teacher could.
- There is the boy. I cannot handle entering his misery at being helpless and voiceless, because it is Ann's experience, too.
- There is the father. Nor can I handle entering his misery at living day after day with his beloved son's helpless and voicelessness and distress, because it is also mine. And now he finds that he has chosen the wrong day to bring his son to Jesus, because Jesus is off somewhere else, and all he can do is stand around, while all the experts do is argue.
- There is the crowd, torn between the disciples and the theologians, sorry for the father and for the son.
- And where is the boy's mother? Is she back home looking after their other children and wondering whether taking their son to Jesus is going to make any difference?

At the end of a meditation we are supposed to talk to God, but I want to do that with anger, not with love and reverence. I ask God, "What do you say back?" and receive at least a sense that it is OK to have said all that, and an awareness that somehow one can live with a story like this. That is partly because it is set in a broader context, a wider narrative, that makes it possible let Jesus take this strangely tough stance and to heal this boy but not my wife.

Then after a meditation we are supposed to pray the Lord's Prayer, and that turns out to be really important, phrase by phrase. This prayer itself expresses much of the challenge that I want to issue to God, and it is this Jesus who bids me pray it! And that is what really assures me that things are OK.

Psalm 139

You discern her thoughts
(even when she cannot articulate them, even to herself).
Even before a word is on her tongue, you know it
(even when the word can never reach her tongue).
You surround her and have your hand on her.

That kind of knowledge is (now) impossible for me (but not for you).

Where can she go from your spirit
(when she seems to have gone, to have left us, to be vacant)?
If she ascends to heaven (as she will), you are there.
If she makes her bed in Sheol (as she will), you are there.
If she says “Surely darkness will cover me”
(if she is scared where all this will lead, scared of losing her mind,
scared of where her mind has gone)
even darkness is not dark to you.
For night is as bright as the day, darkness as light to you.

For it was you who formed her inward parts.
You knit her together in her mother’s womb.
Her form was not hidden from you
When she was being made in secret
(with the weaknesses in her genes that could turn out as they have).
In your book were written all the days that were formed for her
(even these days of helplessness and fading away).

Lead her in the way everlasting.

Luke 13:10-17

Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan has bound for eighteen long years, to be set free from this bondage? “Jesus wants to heal anyone who suffers. He does not let established custom hinder God’s healing gift.” So the notes that accompany our meditation.

Huh! I know a woman afflicted for eighteen years—rather more than that, actually. You do not want to heal her, do you? *Do* you? Do you grieve over her, without healing her? Do you? There are no stories about that. What there is, is promises of that day when tears of pain and love get wiped away. In the meantime you are tough-minded in resolutely not healing.

Where is this woman’s husband or father? What will he make of it? His life is being turned upside-down. If Ann were healed, I wouldn’t know how to start living. But I would soon find out! I would have some confessions to make. She might not want to be in California. I would stop being in charge. But that would be nice. I would not have to be self-sufficient. All those constraints would disappear—not having to be out for more than a few hours, having to have sitters here. She would welcome me home (she does anyway). I would explain things and she would understand (or I would know she understood).

What does the woman think? She was not looking to be healed. She did not ask. She was glad, though. Jesus interferes in our lives unasked in order to do things that are nothing to do with us—you wanted your Father to be glorified and you wanted to put the theologians in their place. It is pure chance whether we are in the way when you want to do something. Or rather, you want to do something with us, too, but it is through not healing. Oh yes, you are intentional, all right.

You wanted to prove something to people—to prove that joy is still possible, that courage stays possible, that it is possible to carry on caring, that you can summon up those resources from within us by the Holy Spirit, that happiness does not lie in what we can do or how far we can travel or how wealthy we are.

I have often said that I can no longer pray for healing for Ann (notwithstanding the parable about the importunate widow), though I am happy for other people to do so. So am I prepared to ask for Ann to be set free by death? Some of my friends have done that. I cannot do that, either. I wonder why that is. It is not because I do not believe in God or in resurrection and therefore doubt whether she would find real relief in going to be with Jesus. I was glad to realize that I really do believe that. Further, it is not because I am afraid to face being without her. I am afraid of that, but I am ready to face it when the time comes.

I think I now know why it is—I did not know while I was sitting on the sofa doing the meditation, but I know as I key these lines. I was talking yesterday to a woman who has a kidney disease and telling her that the reason why I could no longer pray for Ann to be healed was because I cannot raise the spiritual energy in order to have God say “No” again. I now realize that is probably not right. I think it is more that it requires stepping out of the framework in which I think God has invited me to live, which involves accepting that God is not going to heal Ann and living with the consequences—even watching God gain glory through that. I now realize that the same is true with regard to Ann and me living with the illness. To ask God to take Ann and release her (and me!) is to ask for God to change our vocation, to ask God to stop working through us in the way God does. And I do not want to do that.

A friend who has to live with an ongoing grief and loss like ours once said that he looked at us and said, “Well, if John and Ann can do it, maybe I can.” It’s not just a matter of *whether* but *how*. Two nights ago we had students here for pizza after class, and one of them—an interesting, edgy woman who often looks and talks as if living with tensions, angst, and anger—commented on the way I am usually upbeat and jokey despite Ann’s illness. Don’t I ever feel loss? I explained that of course I do, but that I had decided long ago that I (we) were going to enjoy life. We would have to work within the constraints of the illness, but accepting those we would have a good time. To put it another way, I decided we would not be beaten by the illness.

I guess that is another way of putting the way I see our vocation. It is to demonstrate that it is possible to live happily and fully notwithstanding this loss. And to ask for Ann to be freed from her bondage is to say we do not want to fulfill that vocation. One day I imagine God will decide that enough is enough and will free Ann, and I will have to take on another vocation (and I do not look forward to that). But for now I am content with it. And in a strange way that means that Jesus’ phrase does not apply to Ann. She isn’t really bound by Satan, because what might have been Satan’s bonds have been turned into Jesus’ freedom.

Luke 5:17-26

Yes, sometimes Jesus has been teaching and the theologians have been there. But the power of the Lord was with him to heal Ann. And people brought her—they often carry her in their prayers. The crowd makes way for her because they know her and love her. They will not be put off and they insist on bringing her to Jesus’ attention; that’s the nature of prayer. And when he sees their faith he says “I love you, Ann.” You see, he goes for the inner need both times. Physical healing isn’t the thing that really counts. It’s forgiveness and glorifying God that counts. The theologians are supportive, not hostile. For Jesus, it is as easy to say “Get up and walk.” But he doesn’t say that. But when she could do so, she still glorified God. And voicelessly she does so now, or we do together. And amazement seizes everyone and they are amazed and they glorify God and say “We have seen great things today.”

John 4:1-14

From somewhere I have in my head the words “not merely to survive but to triumph.” I think they were a promise from God, and much of the time Ann and I have done the second and not merely the first. But today I read a story about Jesus being apprehensive or pressured, sitting down wearily by a well, being hungry and thirsty, alone and asking for refreshment, and I realize anew that it is OK to do those things. I have been feeling a bit like this, though I am not sure why. But it might be the grief at Ann not being able to talk. It makes me feel apprehensive—e.g., every time I notice a new little loss, like the way her fingers and hands and wrists are now inclined to curl in as if she is folding in on herself. I feel as if there cannot be any other way in which she loses, but she keeps finding new little ways, and each one is like a little death. I am apprehensive about where it may lead. I have always reckoned I would be able to look after her till the end. But will I be able to? Will it be necessary for her to go into a nursing home? That would be terrible—worse than dying in a way, because her continuing to live but our not being able to live together and my not being able to look after her is neither one thing nor the other.

But the person who is tired and asks for help is the person who has an independent and unique source of fresh, running water, and who goes on to share it. It is supernatural resources that he shares, not natural resources that will run out. He makes a promise to the woman at the well that I know he has fulfilled for me, and in a paradoxical way for Ann, too. People who drink of his water find it magically transformed into their own fresh spring. I presume it then gushes up not merely to give them life, but to give life to other people; that is what his spring is like. The fact that Ann brings life to other people is my evidence that Jesus has fulfilled the promise for her, even though often it does not look like it. So how do I share the spring that Jesus has set within me? The same way she does, I guess, just by “being.” And by talking about it, and talking about Ann, especially as she cannot. Paradoxically, by being willing to show when I am tired, or grieved, and saddened by loss and potential loss, and in the way I show it by showing that I am also resourced. But I do it by showing that I am man and not superman. I am fortunate that I do not have any option about whether I reveal or conceal my feelings, joyful or grieved; they spill out.

Luke 5:27-32

Come and have dinner. The notes that help us work through the Ignatian Exercises often give us a one-sentence summary of the significance of the passage we are reading. Today’s is that this is a story about Jesus “coming to people like me.” But it is not. Jesus is at a dinner given by Levi the tax-collector. The company includes tax-collectors and others who are not identified, though I imagine there were some of Jesus’ disciples among them. A comment about Jesus eating with tax-collectors and sinners presumably implies that there were other moral and social outcasts there. In this sense they were not people like me, or like most of the people I know, or most of the people likely to read this book. We are not moral or social outcasts nor are we people who have given up anything much to follow Jesus.

Yet people like me are in the story, all right. They are the Pharisees and the scribes, the people who are especially committed to living in accordance with the scriptures and the people whose vocation was to try to work out what those scriptures had to say to us. Put these two together and you have an evangelical theologian, and that is what I am. Evangelicals and theologians had excluded themselves from the dinner Jesus went to and Jesus had accepted that. He tells them that he had not come for people like

them but for people who moved in the kind of circles Levi belonged to (not righteous but sinners).

He does not come for people like me. In this story people like me stood on the outside looking in. A party in Galilee will have been more like a party in California than one in Britain. Most times of year it would be warm enough to eat outside, perhaps in a courtyard, and people on the outside would be able to look on. That is what the Pharisees and scribes did. I would be among them, along with the kind of people who are publishing this book and selling it and reviewing it and reading it. It would take a miracle to bring one such onlooker into the dinner party itself (consider the story of Saul, who got the miracle, and that of most other Pharisees and scholars who did not). So it is a miracle that actually I am at the dinner (with publishers and booksellers and reviewers and readers).

I imagine Jesus sitting at the dinner. He sees the crowd of us evangelicals and theologians looking into the courtyard. There is hostility in the eyes of many of us. In my own heart there are mixed feelings. I am committed to living by the scriptures and to thinking through their implications, and Jesus will not talk or think or behave in accordance with my study of them. He therefore worries me, as he worries my colleagues. He seems a danger. He has a way of attracting ordinary people and I fear he may lead them astray, out of the path the scriptures lay before us. At the same time I can see why he attracts them. He talks in a way that is in another sense radically scriptural, getting to the heart of the matter. He says things that I have never thought of, but that actually fit with what the scriptures say. It is just that I had never seen it that way. Is he just demonically clever? Or is this God's truth?

We ask some of his disciples who are sitting nearer the edge of the courtyard why he eats with tax-collectors and sinners in this way, if he is really committed to the scriptures and to their call to be holy. For some of us it is an aggressive question, but others of us want to understand the answer, want to be able to make sense of this man. From the center of the courtyard, the focus of the party, he overhears us and brings the question out into the open and gives that answer that hurts so much because it excludes. "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." But then I imagine Jesus adding "but you can come, too, if you like." And then he turns away and resumes his conversation.

When they hear it, they go away, one by one, beginning with the elders, until I am left alone, standing before Jesus. Eventually Jesus breaks off his conversation again and looks up and says to me "Where are they?" I have been thinking that I must turn myself into some form of sinner to qualify for admission to Jesus' company (and I could do that), and I have been thinking about the weaknesses of scribes and Pharisees. There is the setting of theological limits that forbids Jesus to forgive sin. There is the stress on formal rights and wrongs like plucking corn on the Sabbath. There is the desire to condemn someone for sexual sin. What are the weaknesses that I need to confess? "That's a typical Pharisee's or scribe's question," he replies. "I am not in the condemning business. Come and have dinner." And I go in.

In due course people start muttering about needing to relieve their babysitters, and collecting their sandals, and he looks at me again. "Now you can go your way," he says. So in accordance with his word I go back to the evangelicals and the theologians, and undertake the purification ritual that will cleanse me after my contact with sin. I begin my life again as neither one thing nor the other, neither Pharisee nor scribe, nor a follower or disciple. I am someone who tries to be both, a theologian and a disciple. This may be harder than being one or the other, but I have no choice. I am a both-and person by nature, not an either-or person. I feel a bit like those Magi in T. S. Eliot's poem, who have to go back to their kingdoms, but can never be at ease there. It is simpler to be one thing

or the other, but it is not everyone's privilege (and to be truthful, I would not have my calling otherwise).

Romans 8:14-17, 26-27

Over several months, I was not sleeping well. Sometimes I would not be able to get to sleep, sometimes I would awake several times in the night but fall asleep again, sometimes I would wake up and not be able to get back to sleep, sometimes I would wake up in the morning with a headache. I tried giving up coffee and red wine, but was pleased to find that this did not help. Then over another month things more or less righted themselves, and I awoke this morning especially grateful for that. I was somehow now aware that the major reason for the sleeplessness had been an anxiety about Ann, about how things would be in the future and how I would cope. That anxiety had simply gone away. When it was affecting me, I was not really aware that it was my problem, nor was I very aware of seeking to deal with it or of how it came to go away.

I was thinking about this as I came to Romans 8. I came to see the inner expression of anxiety as the voice of the Spirit groaning inarticulately in a way that my Father could understand and respond to even though at a conscious level I did not know what I was groaning about, or even that I was groaning. I remind myself of the Israelites in Egypt and then in Babylon groaning without expressing their groan directly to God (Exod 2:23; Isa 40:27)—but their cry reached God even though they didn't express it to God. My cry was not just my cry but the cry of the Spirit within me, because the Spirit dwells in my spirit. In crying out without consciously knowing that I was doing that, I was giving expression to the fact that I am a child of God and I was being led by the Spirit. And in hearing and understanding that cry God was giving expression to the fact of being my Father. My Father was not merely overhearing and interpreting that cry, but was then somehow responding to it and dissolving my anxiety, I do not know how—somehow because spirit and Spirit were speaking to one another.

I do not know how, but I do know why—because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. The will of God is that I should be confident about the future, not fearful about it, so the Spirit made me cry out, or rather turned my inarticulate cry of anxiety into a prayer that God would answer because it was in accordance with God's will. I had not received a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear—Paul maybe means to fall back into a fear of God, but God also has surely not given me a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear of the future. My having received a spirit of adoption is the way God delivered me from that spirit of fear. Further, in treating me like this as a son, God has witnessed to the fact that I am an heir, heir to a good future, not a bad future. (And so is Ann, who groans inarticulately, and whose cry God hears as her Father, and who then lives much of the time in apparent contentment.)

Two days later I was thinking about this again and I remembered that I had been concluding that I had just reached an age when sleep was going to be more of a problem, and now that is no longer so again. I fall to sleep as my head touches the pillow. Further, during the period I have described, for the first time caring for Ann seemed a burden. As put her into bed, I would think "How long does this have to go on?" Now that feeling has gone and I am content or even glad again to be caring for her.

John 11; John 6:1-15

Lord, she whom you love is ill. This illness has not led to death but to God's glory. So Jesus loves us and knows she is ill, but stays away (if he were here, he would have to heal!). I say to him, "Lord if you had been here, she would not be like this—or

she would be dead and it would be all over. But even now you could do it.” “She will rise again.” “I know.” “Even now she lives.” “I believe.” “If you had been here she would not be like this.” Jesus is greatly disturbed and in turmoil at us. He weeps. He wants to see her. He thanks God. He bids her get up. She gets up. He bids them take off the tube and catheter.

One night I dreamt that Ann was physically healed. I had left her in her wheelchair with a friend while I was in a meeting or something, and when I came back to take her to our house to rest, she was out of the wheelchair jumping and dancing about. This was the second time this had happened, or the second time I had dreamt this that night. I took her back home to have her rest, but realized that it was now hazardous to leave her alone in case she did something dangerous. The problem was that she was now fine physically, but she was not restored mentally. It was a bit like when she was once affected in manic fashion by ACTH.

A large crowd kept following Jesus because they saw the signs he did for the sick. At first I thought about following him because he did not do signs for the sick. Then I thought about following him because he did do signs for the sick, though not by healing her. Then I thought about other people keeping following him because he did signs for the sick and her husband.

22 Vocation

In the Midst of Life We Are in Death (and Vice Versa)

One of the images I carry with me from the time that our family were here for the millennium is of Ann and Daniel sitting alongside each other in the kitchen. Ann is in her wheelchair, Daniel in his highchair. Both need to be lifted there and fed there. Both are helpless without the assistance of the rest of us. Yet Daniel is full of dynamic energy, waving his arms and his feet, banging on his table, having a go at feeding himself, shouting, grinning, looking round. His dynamism and energy highlights Ann’s loss of these. Just occasionally she will smile or groan, but her slight movements of head or hands are involuntary. She can do nothing. She and Daniel are passing each other on the train tracks that join life and death, but they are traveling in opposite directions.

T. S. Eliot wrote a poem about the theologians’ visit to see Jesus when he was born, and has them describing their visit as like an experience of death and not just of life, though the motif is not present in the actual story in Matthew 2. Oddly enough, it *is* present in the story in Luke 2 of Jesus being presented to God in the temple, forty days after the birth, in keeping with the instructions in Leviticus 12. In the church’s calendar it thus comes in February after the visit of the theologians, which we celebrate on January 6, but we have no concrete information about when this Epiphany happened, and it may well have been much later.

So the time comes for “their” purification. “They” are presumably Mary and Jesus, and it may seem odd that either should need purification at this moment. The church’s readings for the Feast of the Presentation encourage us to think that this purification is something to do with sin. But the stain and cleansing that are involved in birth do not relate to sin. They are similar to the stain and cleansing that attach to menstruation or the emission of semen, or to other forms of contact with blood or with bodily emissions or with death. They reflect an awareness of being in contact with something mystical, mysterious, awesome, numinous. We are in touch with matters of life and death. We thought that life and death were different things, Eliot’s theologians comment, but found that they were interwoven.

Israel knew that life and death were different and yet were interwoven. Birth makes that especially clear. It involves blood, which threatens death. In traditional societies birth could often mean the death of the mother and/or of the child. Even today, it is said that a hospital put up a notice reminding staff that the first ten minutes of someone's life were among the most dangerous; a wag added that the last ten minutes could be pretty tricky, too. Giving birth and being born are matters of life and death, moments when we are in touch with mysterious, supernatural realities and are virtually unable to avoid transgressing the fine line between them. The rite of purification re-established that line, but in doing so it reaffirmed its thinness. Life and death are interwoven.

The birth of a firstborn son took parents and son near that line in a different way. Life belonged to God and came from God, and traditional societies recognized this by giving the first of the crops and the firstborn of animals back to God. For them, life became death. God did not require this actual offering of human offspring, but did require a firstborn son to be formally and sacramentally presented to God and to have an offering made in his place in recognition of this debt. Life for him could have meant death for him, were it not for God's desire to receive a symbolic offering in his place.

So much was true of any firstborn that day in Jerusalem. There is more to be said about Jesus. A man called Simeon awaits his arrival. We assume he is an old man, though the story does not say so, but it does say that he is a man with death in his mind. God has told him he will not see death until he has seen the Lord's Messiah. He recognizes that this is the moment of that seeing, and therefore that God is now letting him go to his death. Jesus' birthing means his dying, and that is fine by him, because he has seen all he ever wanted to see.

And Simeon affirms that, in a way, all this applies to others than him. "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel." It will begin with the death of the babies in Bethlehem and it will end with the mysterious rising of corpses from tombs at the moment of Jesus' own death. Jesus' taking up his cross will make a demand of anyone who follows him. They will have to do the same. Paradoxically, they will then discover that they thereby gain their lives rather than losing them. Death and life are interwoven, all right. "A sword will pierce your own soul, too," he adds to Mary. Life will mean death for her.

Finally there appears a prophet called Anna. She is explicitly a woman of great age, a woman whose vigorous life of worship, fasting, and prayer belies the proximity to death that her years suggest. In spirit she is fully alive, if her body is near death. In her own way she, too, belies the distinction between life and death.

Perhaps Anna and Simeon stand for the worship of the temple as a whole. It is full of life and vitality and meaning, but it is destined soon to die because of the different life and vitality and meaning embodied in this new life that Mary and Joseph have brought here to present to God. Leaving the presence of the about-to-die Simeon and the aged Anna, Joseph and Mary take Jesus to a new home where he grows and becomes strong and fills with wisdom as life matures.

Yes, death and life are interwoven. The willingness of Daniel's mother, Sue, to risk death meant life for Daniel. Daniel's liveliness calls forth life from Ann. Ann's dying brings both dying and life to me. It calls forth life from people she meets, even as it invites them to face weakness and death. Yesterday we sat in a café. For a while Ann was able to swallow, and I fed her pieces of chocolate truffle and spoonfuls of tea. After a while a woman came across and said it had been a blessing to her just to watch: I don't really know what she meant, but it implied that there had been something life-giving about Ann's dying.

A student wrote in an essay for me last month that the most formative experience of her course in the Pentateuch had been meeting Ann. The student had found herself trying to give Ann something to drink at a tea party at our apartment, and had found this very difficult – emotionally, not merely practically. But she had made herself do it, and in a way she could not quite explain, it had been a life-giving experience.

When our family left for home, I felt churned up by this in a way that I have never felt before, and am still working out why. I had met our grandson briefly when he was two weeks old, but that was more than a year ago, so the person who arrived here was a bouncing fifteen-month-old, full of life and energy. Of course he did not know how to relate to me as I imagine he knows how to relate to the other grandfather who lives a mile away from him. Neither did I know how to relate to him as someone who will never be able to develop a regular grandfatherly relationship with him (whatever that is). One great wonder of the time here was the joy he brought to Ann, as I hoped. She talked and smiled and laughed whenever he was about. The talk was still just phrases such as “Where’s the baby?” but that was more than usual. Further, one could sense inside her a seething turmoil of reaction and questions that longed to find expression in words but could not do so.

For me, another great wonder and monumental joy of the time here was been watching his parents look after him and relate to each other. While they no doubt have their conflicts and arguments (at least, they say they do), here they simply got on with the job of sharing in parenting in a supremely relaxed and happy fashion. Greater than the astonishment of gaining that fully-grown fifteen-month-old grandson has been the astonishment of gaining these fully-grown fifteen-month-old parent-children.

When I met Daniel those fifteen months ago, I took him for a walk in his stroller, and I found this by far the most moving experience of the time I was there, and a quite confusing one. Either I did not know who he was, or I did not know who I was. Am I me, so is this my son in the stroller, and have I gone back thirty years? Or is this Daniel, and am I my son, his father? I had heard psychologist James Fowler talk about “revisiting” earlier stages in your life when your children went through them, and I guess I had done this as they had got married, but it was the first time I had felt it so powerfully.

This time I felt it more so. All the time we watched Daniel’s parents, it was as if we were watching ourselves thirty years ago. I knew it moved me and disturbed me in some way, though I did not know quite why. It came to a climax as we said goodbye and they put Daniel into the car and stowed the last pieces of luggage and sat beside each other in the front and drove out, and I went back into our apartment and burst into tears. Only the next day did I work out why. It was precisely because in looking at them I was seeing Ann and me thirty years ago, and was therefore having thrust into my awareness the fact that we have lost so much over these thirty years. Once, we lived and worked together as parents and spouses and friends and lovers as these two do, and now we do not, and I had forgotten what it was like. For most of the time I do not think about how things once were, but get along with managing things as they are and finding happiness in doing so. It is a survival mechanism. Suddenly I experienced this huge new sense of loss at what Ann’s illness has taken away from us.

There is a very positive side to this. It is a shame to forget the happiness and the effectiveness of the way we were thirty years ago, and I am glad to be reminded of it. But it is painful.

Next night we said goodbye to our younger son and his wife. We went out for a meal with them and the other members of our daughter-in-law’s family and friends, and after that we sat in a bar and the girls did karaoke. Eventually we all left, they to walk one way to where they were staying before catching their plane, we to walk home. Again I found myself crying, and I wondered why that should be so on this occasion. And I

realized that it was because I had known that this visit might well be the last time that they saw their mother. It was bizarre for them to be saying such a goodbye as we left a bar. I do not know what they felt as they said a ritual “See you soon.” It is unlikely that I was saying “goodbye” for the last time, but very possible that *we* were doing so. It would then be the last time that we as mother and father did this. Next time I meet them there might well only be me.

In the Midst of Life We Are in Death (Again)

Perhaps it is from this subsequent story in Matthew 2:13-23 that Eliot got his idea about life and death being interwoven, for the theologians’ visit to Jesus brought death. Herod rightly perceives a threat to his throne, a threat to the delicate political stability of the region, and realizes that he must take decisive action in order to forestall trouble. Frustrated in his desire to eliminate Jesus, he eliminates all the babies in the Bethlehem area up to two years. I give him the benefit of the doubt (sort of) in assuming that he assumed that Jesus was still in the area and that this was an action designed to catch him among the others, though it could have been an act of mere spite. Matthew does not say that he killed only the boys. How many babies are we talking about? Let us imagine it might have been a hundred.

And Rachel weeps for her children. Six centuries previously, Jeremiah had imagined Rachel weeping for her children, when they were carried off into exile. The traditional site of Rachel’s tomb is just north of Bethlehem, and Matthew imagines Rachel weeping again. In Jeremiah God reassures her that these children will return, for they are not dead. And their descendants do have the opportunity to return. Matthew’s story is a more terrifying one, because these children are dead, and they will not return. Nor is this the only reason why the story is terrifying. For they die in a context where God puts in some effort to save others.

To begin with, God warns the theologians themselves, who are the indirect unwitting cause of their death through their ill-advised, naïve, too-loud asking of questions in Jerusalem. I presume that the point of this warning is to save them from Herod’s wrath. If it is to save Jesus, then it actually leads eventually to the death of Rachel’s children.

Then God directly warns Joseph of Herod’s intent and tells him to flee – to Egypt, of all places. If there is a place of death, it is Egypt. It was there that a whole generation of Israelite baby boys had lost their lives because of the fear of an earlier foreign king. And it was there that the deliverance of Israel had prompted the death of a whole generation of the firstborn sons of Egyptian mothers. God’s life-giving purpose brings death in its train.

We fear to read on in Matthew’s story, and our fear is justified. There is a warning for the theologians and a warning for Joseph, but there is no warning for the mothers of Bethlehem. One night Herod’s angels of death knock on the doors of each home in Bethlehem and there is a wail like the wail of Israelite mothers in Exodus 1—2 and Egyptian mothers in Exodus 12. The one who came to bring life to the world has brought death to them. There is no intervention to save them, and I scream out “Why?”

And I know some of the answers, though they will not satisfy you. God is not much in the intervention business. If God intervened every time a child is threatened with abuse or death, or every time a mother gets struck down with MS, this would cease to be the world God created. Parents cannot let their children grow up without also risking them to life’s hazards and to their becoming the perpetrators and the victims of wrong. Managers cannot give real responsibility to their employees without risking their making wrong decisions. God cannot create real people without taking the same risk. I cannot

imagine a world in which you can square this circle, and I imagine God cannot. God may and does intervene to warn and to heal from time to time, but cannot make a habit of it.

The Egyptians oppressed many peoples and they cried out under their bondage, but God responded only to the cry of the Israelites. There were many widows and sick people in Israel in the time of Elijah and Elisha, but these prophets ministered only to a woman from Sidon and a general from Syria. I guess there have been many peoples as wicked as the Canaan of Joshua's day (in the contemporary Western world, to start with), but they have not been in the wrong place at the wrong time, like the Canaanites, and like the babies of Bethlehem, on whose behalf God does not lift a finger, or to whose parents God send no warning like the one sent to Joseph.

There may be some randomness about whether you get an intervention or not, though in general the principle for God's action is clear. We ask why this happened to *me* and assume that there must be something about us that caused it. Our troubles were caused by our sin, or we got healed because of our faith, or because someone was praying for us. And sometimes this is so. But it was not so for the Israelite babies in Egypt, or the Egyptian firstborn, or the Canaanites, or the babies of Bethlehem. What God does with us, for life or death, relates rather to God's wider purpose. The Canaanites and the babies of Bethlehem died so that we might live.

On television there is an extraordinary program called *Touched by an Angel*. It must have been running for years, because repeats of old episodes are broadcast *every night*. The angels are wondrously "human" creatures, like the angels in the Old Testament. Last night's repeat concerned a woman who blamed herself for her baby's cot-death. Discovering that one of the "people" who is trying to help her cope is an angel, the woman asks in anguish why there was no angel present at that terrible moment when her baby suffocated. "Oh there was," says the angel. "Sentimental twaddle," I thought, and then remembered what Jesus says about "these little ones' angels" always seeing the face of their Father in heaven. I guess it was the same for the babies of Bethlehem. Jesus' life brought them death, but their angels see their Father's face (and insist on life for them?).

And I realized that grown-ups have angels, too (at least, Peter had one according to Acts 12:15), and that Ann has an angel who sees her Father's face and in some sense represents her before God, and who grieves as I do when Ann's own face is contorted with frustration or loss or sadness or a volcano inside that cannot get its lava out. And I put that alongside the evidence that God uses her death to bring life to others.

Rachel weeping. I guess she had wept often. Perhaps she started weeping when Jacob fell in love with her, because being loved makes you weep. It denies the inner sense of being unlovable and thus both draws attention to it and makes it possible for it to surface. Then she wept when her father gave her sister to the man who loved her, as well as being made very angry. I wonder how they had got on before that, Leah with her seniority and Rachel with her beauty? Then she wept when she could not have children, and wept even more when Leah did have children, as well as being angry with Leah and with Jacob. Then she wept when her maid could have children on her behalf, because her maid was having children on her behalf, and because Rachel was not having the children herself. Then she wept because God thought about her and heeded her and opened her womb. Then she wept when they left Laban, because she was estranged from the father whose teraphim she then stole and whom she then deceived over them.

Then she definitely wept when she died in giving birth to her last son, *Ben-oni*, "Son of my sorrow." And she wept as the family moved on and left her there in the tomb alone. And centuries later she wept (Jeremiah says) as she watched her "children" trudging past on the way to exile. Indeed, Jeremiah sees her weeping before the event takes place. She weeps, as he does, at the prospect of what is to happen to them. She

weeps because they are *her* children; that is, in a sense she weeps for herself, for her own loss. And she weeps because they are her *children*, because of the loss that Israelites experience at this moment. And centuries later she wept again as she witnesses the death of people who are literal children, who die as a result of Jesus' birth. And centuries later I guess she weeps again as Israelis and Palestinians fight around her.

Dying

There have been three occasions when I thought Ann was dying. Admittedly, once every few days I wonder momentarily whether she has actually died. Usually it is when she has gone very quiet in bed and I look to see whether she has stopped breathing in the night. I guess that some time she may die in the night like that—indeed, I rather hope so, because the alternative ways of dying are grimmer.

But on three occasions I have thought she was soon going to die. On the first, she had that huge and protracted convulsive seizure that I described in chapter 1. In reality it was not life-threatening, but in the middle of the night when you have never seen such convulsions before, it seemed so. The second was the genuinely life-threatening development I described in chapter 21. The years that followed seemed a kind of bonus, like the postponement of an execution.

The third occasion was in 2003, when she developed pneumonia. With hindsight, I should have spotted it some while before it became a crisis. She had been coughing and spluttering for a week or two, and I had propped up the top of her bed on a concrete block to try to discourage the coughing and spluttering during the night so that she (and I!) could get more sleep. She had also been moaning and groaning. One Friday we went to see *Citizen Kane*. Twice I had to bring her out of the auditorium because I was afraid she was disturbing other people with noises that were not merely disputing the claim that this is the greatest movie ever made (though I did realize it was the first postmodern one). On the Sunday she was groaning again and looking very hot, and I would probably have taken her to Immediate Care, the walk-in surgery, were it not for the fact that we were due for a routine visit from a nurse next morning to change her urinary catheter. The nurse came, took one look at her (or rather, found that her temperature was 103.6 and her pulse 150), and said "Never mind about the catheter, get her to Immediate Care straightaway." The doctor put her on an I.V. drip and worked to get her temperature down, and that evening transferred her to a hospital.

The discovery of antibiotics means that having pneumonia is not usually life-threatening for an otherwise healthy person, but I knew that it is one of the ways people with MS die, as is the case for elderly people. Their internal weaknesses mean they may no longer be able to cough up phlegm etc, or swallow their saliva properly, and neither can they stop such material eventually drifting back into their lungs. People with a gastric tube are also susceptible to having the nutrition drift back from the stomach into the lungs. Eventually infection will follow, and in neither case can they fight it as effectively as other people can. In the event, the antibiotics did the fighting for Ann, and she was home before the week was out. Two weeks after seeing *Citizen Kane*, to my astonishment we were able to use the tickets for a David Gray concert that I had bought months previously. Two days after that, we were able to join our Bible study group for a picnic and an open-air concert by Mark Knopfler, and I kept thinking about the occasion nearly two decades ago when a concert by Mark Knopfler's band, Dire Straits, was the first one we ever went to as a family, when our sons were teenagers and Ann could walk.

Another ten days later, she again spent a night coughing and spluttering, and it seemed as if the pneumonia might be returning. Once more I wondered whether she was dying after all; so really there have been three and a half times when I thought this was the

case (indeed, it continues to be the case that each time she coughs, an irrational anxiety comes over me). Near midnight that night one of our sons phoned to tell us that his wife had just had a baby girl, our first granddaughter, and I thought about the strange way life and death can interweave. In the morning, when things often look a little less gloomy than they do in the small hours as you toss and turn, I sat with God and found myself saying “I know Ann will be all right. She will be with you. And I know I will be all right. Getting used to her finally having gone will be awful (but no worse than for anyone else losing their spouse—probably better, because I have been losing her for years). But I will come out the other side. I will be with you.” Later that day I was telling an Old Testament class what was going on, and I found myself speaking in terms of having to pastor myself in reminding myself of these facts, so that I could gird up my loins for whatever the day would bring. In a way it was a shame that at this moment I had to do my own pastoring (it is not always so), though in the end you do anyway have to affirm and own such truths for yourself. Some Job’s comforter telling you what you ought to believe is not enough.

Either side of that class I spent another day sitting in Immediate Care while they took x-rays and did tests and eventually concluded that Ann had two or three different, smaller problems, but that the pneumonia had not returned. Over the next few days, the action they took would solve one problem, but also cause another as a side effect, and so on....

Keeping Alive

“How long are you going to carry on keeping Ann alive?” Over the past two years, half-a-dozen people – doctors, therapists, chaplains – have raised the question with me.

I could see that one could ask questions about whether it was right to keep “alive” in a “vegetable” state a person such as Tony Bland, the teenager who was crushed to near-death at a British soccer game. It had not occurred to me that quite the same questions arose concerning Ann. Thinking about it, I realize that there are closer parallels than I might have cared to acknowledge. As happens to such a person, we feed Ann through a tube and we drain her urine through another tube. We give her various forms of medicine in order to enable her to evacuate her bowels, and sometimes have to take more interventionist action in order to make that happen. We put pillows in strategic places and move her from time to time to try to stop her from getting pressure sores. We exercise her unmoving fingers and hands and elbows. All these are operations performed for people in a coma. When we go to the cinema or to concerts now, she cannot hold up her head for long enough to see through the film or the gig—though she did pay close attention to the re-released *A Hard Day’s Night* and to a Beatles tribute band called *The Fab Four*. I listened to some lectures on caring for people with Alzheimer’s, and the lecturer argued strongly against fitting a gastric feeding tube to such people. It prolongs a life that it is inappropriate to prolong. In Ann’s case, did we prolong a life that it was inappropriate to prolong?

In the U.S.A., Australian ethicist Peter Singer is the great advocate of a “rethinking of life and death,” the title of a book whose jacket locates it “in the tradition of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*.” He is enough of a media celebrity to have made an appearance on Charlie Rose’s nightly interview program on public television, in a sequence that routinely includes people such as Peter O’Toole, the stars of *West Wing*, and the afore-mentioned David Gray. A recent issue of the U.S. Jewish monthly *Commentary* carries an advertisement for a book by Wesley J. Smith called *The Culture of Death: The Assault on Medical Ethics in America*. According to the advertisement, the book shows how “the ‘right to die’ is slowly being transformed into the duty to die.” The

advertisement does not refer to Singer, but the “brave new worldview” it describes looks like his, and it implies that his views are not merely the subject of seminars in Princeton but are the commonplace of the doctor’s office.

That corresponds to my own experience. On the first occasion Ann had pneumonia, I was struck by the matter-of-fact way in which a charge nurse placed under my nose a form indicating which types of action I wanted taken if Ann’s death seemed to be imminent. It was called a “Request to decline life-prolonging procedures,” though the questions it asked were actually more open than this title implies. Do you want resuscitation? Yes or No? Do you want use of a respirator/ventilator? Yes or No? Do you want blood transfusion? Yes or No? And so on. I felt like a wimp answering “Yes” to them all.

The doctors, therapists, and chaplains, and Singer, are not inventing a problem, and they are certainly not heartless people. Indeed, in a review article about Singer’s work in *The New Republic* (10 January 2000), with the subtitle “Other People’s Mothers,” Peter Berkowitz contrasted Singer’s published views with his treatment of his own mother, who apparently herself has Alzheimer’s. Singer sees she gets well looked after, Berkowitz pointed out, and rightly, but he thus “flagrantly violates” his own moral theory. “It is different when it’s your mother,” Singer comments, according to Michael Spector’s earlier profile of “The Dangerous Philosopher” in *The New Yorker* (6 September 1999). Even the professional is a layperson in other contexts; I myself write as another version of this combination. Singer acknowledges that when you are personally involved, it makes you realize that “perhaps it is more difficult than I thought before.”

I am continually moved by the loving stance that people in the caring professions take to Ann and to me, and by the energy and skill of their caring. Their problem is the down side to the extraordinary technological advances that make it more and more possible to prolong a life that has no “quality.” And I can see that Ann’s life can seem that way. She has tubes sticking out of different orifices. The only part of her body that she can seem to have some control over is her eyebrows, which I have often given her cause to raise. She cannot move a finger. She can rarely even smile, except when I tickle the side of her mouth, and I could wonder whether that is involuntary. She has virtually no sensation except there in her face and in some of her internal organs (to judge from the groaning I referred to). Her hand once slipped down onto the wheel of her wheelchair when we were out walking, and all unawares to either of us it had become raw and bleeding by the time we reached our destination—which was, ironically/happily, the doctor’s office.

Just occasionally we get an indication that she understands things we say—for instance when I give her news from our sons, such as that news that she has a granddaughter. But she can say nothing, except, strangely, that after waking from a drug-induced nap, for a few seconds she can sometimes say “Yes” or “No” (though I confess I am not always sure whether to trust the answer) or even ask a question or utter a sentence such as “That hurt,” as she did the other day when I put drops in her eyes. But she does not know what country she lives in, or what city, or what street, let alone what day it is, nor would she be sure of the names of any of the people she ever sees except me (I think/hope).

So the next time she catches pneumonia, as she will, should we really take her into hospital and put her on an I.V. and fill her full of antibiotics and hope this is not the occasion when they cease being effective or when her system stops fighting? Or should we follow the doctor’s invitation and opt for “hospice care,” which in California means providing nursing at home to ensure someone is comfortable and free of pain while they die a natural death in the context of their family and loved ones?

The trouble is that the professionals' stance differs so much from the layperson's. The professionals' stance did actually match reflections of my own that I had hardly articulated. It can seem now as if Ann is almost gone—gone to be with Jesus, gone to rest in Abraham's bosom. There is so little of her here now.

It is notoriously difficult to define the moment of death, and this is in strange harmony with the Psalms. They are inclined to speak of so-called life as if it were death ("I was in the depths of Sheol"), implying that it is possible to be overcome by death while you are still alive. Elsewhere in the Old Testament some effort is made to keep life and death separate. People were not supposed to cook a kid goat in its mother's milk, for instance, which brings life and death into harsh juxtaposition. People were encouraged to be rather awed by menstrual blood, which strangely holds together death (blood) and life (the possibility of conception). I have come to reckon that the Old Testament looked for symbolic ways of affirming the real distinction between life and death because it recognized that actually life and death overlap. They do in Ann's case. Are we "striving officiously to keep [half-]alive)," insisting on holding onto Ann when she and God both think it is time for her to go?

Vocation

In the past I have often noted how in her disability Ann has exercised a ministry to people, though I have had a hard time discerning the mystery of what this ministry was or how it worked. But much of the time she exercised this ministry was when she could communicate a bit, at least by responding with a smile to people who said "Hello." She can hardly exercise it now, can she?

I voiced that suspicion to one of the people who come to sit with her from time to time—not because I need her to do that, but because she wants to. She has known Ann for only a year, and has therefore no acquaintance with Ann when she was more responsive. "No," she protested. "Ann's spirit ministers to my spirit." Another friend who comes to sit with Ann and read to her says that she leaves healed and human—something she does not so much feel as she deals with "fully-functioning" people through the rest of the week.

Ann lost the ability to speak at about the same time as losing her swallow, and the comment about her spirit reminded me of the words of another friend at that time. The problem about speaking is not a physical one, like (say) Stephen Hawking's, so that we could provide Ann with another means of expressing herself. It is a neurological problem affecting the brain itself, and it means she cannot work out what she wants to say. This friend, a speech therapist, explained to me that "encoding" (working out what you want to say) is four times more difficult than "decoding" (working out what someone else has said to you). Hence it is possible to have the ability to understand what someone else says, but not to determine what to say back. I had expressed my (stupid intellectual's) fear that Ann's inability to work out what to say meant that she could hardly be relating to God, because she could not articulate things to God. Our friend pointed out that God's spirit and Ann's spirit could be in communication even if her brain was not involved. And I have come to realize that of course she and I relate to each other even though she has hardly any more means of "communicating" with me in a traditional sense than she has with anyone else.

Some months ago I was giving Bible expositions at a meeting of the Lausanne Consultation on Jewish Evangelism in Los Angeles, and I was talking about Moses with his extraordinary freedom in talking with God and about the way it provokes God into responding. "It's never worked for me," a friendly heckler interrupted. That led me into describing some of the ways I have talked to God about Ann, which I had not planned to do. And that led a woman in the consultation to ask to talk with me, because she had just

discovered that she probably has MS. She wondered what this was going to mean for her and her husband. He was about to fly off for three months to teach on another continent, and that was typical of the ministry he exercised. It was his vocation. I found myself telling this woman that I had come to realize that looking after Ann was my vocation. I have used that expression in earlier chapters, but this seemed a clearer articulation of it to myself when I expressed it in the context of discussing other forms of ministry. She was startled. "Do you really mean that?" she asked.

One neat thing about a vocation is that you probably don't mind fulfilling it. I can see why people can be tempted to admire the way I look after Ann, but there are several reasons why they should resist the temptation. One is that they do not see the ways in which I have failed her over the years. I have too much shame to write about these failures, even though you might well be compassionate and understanding if I did, but I assure you that I have my reasons for shame. But another reason is that looking after Ann is not a nasty task. As I have implied, people like being with Ann and somehow get something out of it, and I like being with her, too. (Indeed, in general, I should not imply that my life is an unhappy one—it looks to me at least as happy as that of most of the people I meet.)

It is hard to know how things are for Ann herself now, but I know how things were when she could be more articulate. She has long felt a deep loss at not being able to "do more," and in particular at not being able to work as a psychiatrist as she once did, and yet generally she has had a kind of contentment about her, and I think she still has this—the moaning and groaning when she had pneumonia were an understandable exception. In this sense she came to look happier than when she was much fitter, when she was a more driven and worrying person. One of her carers comments that Ann accepts anything as it is.

Ann's acceptance led me to be able to accept myself and to be myself. In Ann I found peace and a resting place, and God's acceptance of every human being. In my four years with Ann, I have never heard her shout or grumble or say something bad to someone. Once when we had waited several hours for a handicapped taxi and I was feeling impatient at the service we were receiving, she simply said "Take it easy, Yanti." In Ann, Jesus' life became real to me.

I feel a terrible, terrible, terrible sense of loss when I think about how things once were for us. It is decades since we were a regular married couple, and my memory is dominated by the subsequent years of progressive weakening, but sometimes I will look at old photographs, or even photographs from a few years ago, and be overwhelmed by the sense of loss. Or I will see some other married couple operating together (maybe our own sons and their wives) and be overwhelmed by a sense of shock that this is how we once were and might have been. Or I will come across letters from over forty years ago and be stupefied at the liveliness of the person who wrote them.

But I do not usually think about that, except when it catches me unawares. For better and for worse, by nature I am a person who lives in the present, and I am not very good at regrets about the past or worries about the future. This is not a virtue or a vice, but just a personality characteristic with advantages and disadvantages. A therapist (I live in California) helped me to see that I probably did not think as hard as I might have done in making the grand romantic decision to go ahead with my relationship with Ann when she had her illness diagnosed, decades ago. But now, that instinct to live in the present makes me simply get on with enjoying life with Ann as what it is. There is nothing wrong with looking after someone. It is an enjoyable, human thing to do, like cooking or making

things grow or knitting, or like being a pastor or theologian or writer or teacher, my other vocations.

Ann's Vocation

Since articulating the conviction that looking after Ann was my vocation, I have come to see that this suggests a way of looking at Ann's illness itself. Her living with her illness is not merely the means of her exercising her ministry but it is itself her vocation.

We talk in terms of vocation or calling in a variety of ways. There is a sense in which the whole church has a vocation or calling, and all individual believers are people who have been called out of darkness into light and called to holiness, though I do not think the Bible speaks in terms of everyone having an individual vocation (for instance, to a form of ministry). I have just spoken in terms of the vocation of pastor, theologian, writer, and teacher, but in reality these are vocations only in an attenuated sense. Really, they are more indulgences. I wonder that I should get paid for doing something I so love. You do not get paid a salary for fulfilling a vocation. In my ecclesial tradition we often talk about someone "having a vocation," meaning they are "called" to ordained ministry or to the religious life. Implicit in such discussion about vocation is the idea that a person is seeking to discover what is the right form of life for them. Is God calling them to ordained ministry or the religious life because that will enable them to give expression to the way God has made them and thus both glorify God and bring them personal fulfillment?

There are a number of respects in which this fits little better with the way scripture thinks about vocation or calling or ministry.

The Hebrew and Greek words for "call," *qara'* and *kaleo*, are much stronger words than the English word "calling" implies in these contexts. God's call is a summons analogous to that of a king or some other person in authority. Such a call or summons is not an invitation. You do not have a great deal of option about responding to it if you value your head. When God called Abraham, God was summoning him as a servant (Isaiah 41:2). Actually, Genesis itself does not speak of God "calling" Abraham, but it does picture God simply telling him "Get yourself out of your country, your family, and your father's household to a land I am going to show you" (Genesis 12:1). It is a peremptory bidding that leaves little room for negotiation. "Follow me," says Jesus, equally peremptorily (e.g., Mark 2:14).

Something similar emerges from consideration of the "call" of a prophet or an apostle. Jeremiah (who also does not use "call" language) speaks of the way God compelled him into the ministry that he often wishes he could evade. In a sense he can, but in another sense he cannot. Paul speaks of God's calling him (e.g., Gal 1:15), and the story of his call (e.g., Acts 9) shows what that was like. A calling or vocation is a no-nonsense, categorical summons from God. There is a sense in which you are free to refuse it, as you are free to refuse any of God's categorical imperatives, though you had better read the story of Jonah before doing so. You are caught between drowning like Jonah if you refuse or agonizing like Jeremiah if you do not. Fortunately, not everyone has a vocation or calling, in the scriptural sense. You do not need a vocation in order to be involved in ministry.

Paradoxically, however, the idea of vocation suggests that the demanding, draining, and dangerous commission you have been given is a strange sort of privilege. You are in a position like that of (say) a special service soldier asked to go on a mission that could prove life-saving for someone else but could be life-threatening for you. You could refuse, but if you do, it raises the question why you are in this unit at all. Seeing a

demanding task as a vocation or summons from God in this way may help you develop the energy to fulfill it.

A colleague asked whether I need this idea of vocation. Perhaps because it seemed a threatening question, I did not ask what he meant, but perhaps the point I have just made is one indication of the value it has for me. Judaism traditionally has a delight in God's commands. Psalm 119 is the classic effusion of this delight. It shows how there need be nothing legalistic in thus saying "Yes" to God, as Christians have often thought there must be. I think I have felt my love for Ann growing as I have been thinking about caring for her being my vocation. Perhaps the idea of vocation again turns out to be self-serving, as when we speak of the vocation of a pastor or a religious or a professor. The question whether I need this idea of vocation then makes me face the question how I know that living with Ann's illness is my vocation, rather than that I have dreamed up the idea to make my position more bearable.

I have two partial answers to that question. One is that articulating it makes me face this as a theoretical possibility but it does not make me then react by acknowledging that it is indeed a reality that I had not been facing. Sometimes that does happen to us—articulating a possibility in this way means we own something we did not own before. That does not happen to me in this instance. And I feel drawn then to continue to trust my spirit, my sense of what has been going on between me and God. The other is the fact that to view living with Ann's illness as my vocation is fruitful not merely for me but for her and for other people. It may be self-serving, but it is not only that. True perceptions are ones that enable us to look tough truths in the face rather than collude with false perceptions that are more comfortable. I now realize that my two partial answers correspond to convictions Jeremiah attempts to articulate as he agonizes over the question how he can prove that his conviction about his vocation is right and the conviction of the other prophets of his day is false (Jeremiah 23:9-40).

Perhaps I also need the idea that living with her illness is Ann's vocation. Perhaps it is a way of formulating a conviction I need, that her experience of loss is not meaningless or random or neglectful or vicious or demonic. Am I then kidding myself? Again, I can see the theoretical possibility but I do not find it rings a bell. Years ago I took a Job-like stance in relation to God over Ann's illness and found God putting me in my place the same as God did Job: "You can confront me if you like, but sorry [except that God did not say "sorry"], I am not answerable to you. How I treat Ann is between me and her." And since then I have lived with Ann's illness as pure enigma with relative contentment. Perhaps the metaphor of vocation comes from God years later as a gift, when perhaps I have proved to myself and to God and to the adversary that I do not need it. And the metaphor does have some explanatory power. It helps me understand how God and Ann can give Ann's life its own strange fruitfulness. And it adds energy to my commitment to her, a commitment to supporting her in her fulfillment of her vocation just as I did when I was supporting her as an intern physician and also wife and mother a third of a century ago.

Ann has been peremptorily summoned or compelled to live with her illness and to make that her vocation, her rather unusual way of living for God and manifesting God, and I have been peremptorily summoned or compelled to live with her having this illness and help her do so and make that my rather unusual way of living for God and manifesting God. She could decline, like Jonah, and let her illness just be an illness and not a vocation. I could also decline. Not long after her illness was diagnosed, and just after I was ordained, a young married couple in our youth fellowship, in their twenties like us, discovered that the wife had MS, and they began the process of living with these issues. Her husband could not handle it and eventually left her. I do not sit in judgment on that, not least because the woman's degeneration was much quicker than Ann's. For this man

the weight of the demand placed on him dropped on his spirit more quickly and devastatingly than it did for me. God has given me the chance to work up to higher weights gradually.

The film *Last Orders* is about (among other things) a couple who had a retarded daughter who at the time of the film is fifty. Her father had never been able to handle this and had never been to see his daughter in the residential home where she lived. Her mother had visited her almost every week for fifty years and never received any sign of recognition from her, and on her husband's death she decided that enough is enough and that she would start a new life. It is possible to refuse or to turn your back on a vocation, and who can sit in judgment on someone doing so?

Now I am trying to think about the question of "keeping Ann alive" in light of her having this vocation. Ann would be several times dead were it not for the wonders of medicine, but the continuing development of these extraordinary ways of keeping people alive (in some sense) means we have a pressing need of discerning when to use them. So we talk about the sanctity of life. Or we ask about quality of life, and/or about what is best for a patient and for their family. Or we ask whether the expenditure involved is justified given the finite resources available. The cost of stopping Ann dying has not been huge, but that recent week in hospital did cost our insurers \$27,000 and I guess this could have stopped scores or hundreds of children dying in Africa (the same is true of every appendectomy or caesarian section). Or we ask about the number of others whose lives you could save if you let this person die and use their organs for transplants (I imagine Ann's body would be of little use for this purpose, though she used to say that in heaven she did want to look at samples of her brain to examine the lesions).

In a postmodern context, we need hardly look for one single criterion in making decisions about life and death. What I want to do here is suggest another criterion that might sometimes provide a clue for discerning God's will in a situation such as this. Over the years, as she has had to live with her increasing disability, Ann has had a vocation to minister to people out of that experience. The question is, does she still have that vocation? I do not imply that this question is any easier to answer than the other questions, but for Ann and me, I like it more as a question. For Ann, in some obvious ways it might be far better to go to be with Christ than to stay here, but when Paul articulated that conviction about what was best for him, he added the recognition that his vocation was to stay to continue his ministry (Phil 1:23-24). That ministry was not completed.

I do not care to think in terms of God's having caused Ann to be ill or sent Ann's illness, except in the (trivial?) sense that God bears some responsibility for everything that happens in the world. I do not exclude the possibility that God might have deliberately caused her illness, but I think it more likely that it is "just one of those things." As the bumper sticker says, shit happens. Admittedly, God stops it happening sometimes (often, perhaps, for all we know) or cleans it up afterwards, but generally we do not experience God as very interventionist—that is just not the kind of world God created. More often (perhaps) what God does is turn calamities into events with positive potential.

I do not know for certain whether God gave Ann a choice about whether she should let her disability become her vocation. But one reason for believing that God did so is that we faced some of these issues (not, indeed, in quite these terms) forty years ago when her illness was diagnosed, as frighteningly-young students in our twenties, in ways I described in chapter 1. I know she said "Yes" to God then, without knowing what that "Yes" might mean, as I did myself. Soon afterwards, we both said "Yes" to God in that situation of risk when her neurologist recommended that she have an abortion because of the stress that pregnancy would bring when she had not long had a relapse of the illness,

and she continued with the pregnancy (and it is that baby whose own second child has just been born).

Another reason for my reckoning that she has been willing to let her disability become her vocation is that it seems unlikely that she would be able to exercise her apparently-involuntary ministry now if in some sense she were not actually willing to do so. Her carer whom I quoted above speaks of once asking Ann how she dealt with MS and with her loss. Ann acknowledged that this was difficult at first, but she said she learned to live with it, and to live by Paul's declaration that God makes everything work together for people who are called by God and love God (Romans 8:28).

Willingly or not, she has a vocation. She has exercised a vocation to me, so that my fulfilling one in relation to her is only a reciprocation. As I often say, people may think that I am an ass-hole now, but if they do, they should have known me before the obligation to grapple with Ann's illness grabbed me by the throat. And as I have suggested, she has exercised this vocation to other people, and continues to do so. The question then is whether she still has this vocation—whether she is still called to it.

Loss, Vulnerability, Mortality

I have always suspected that one fact that drew people to Ann was that she embodies the experience of loss that we hope to avoid and hide from but that might come to any of us, and/or that she embodies the vulnerability and helplessness that we fear. She has thus given us the opportunity to face such realities, perhaps still not consciously realizing that this is what we are doing, and she has embodied the truth that these realities can be experienced and lived with and even made fruitful.

Someone else who spends time with Ann reflected on the awareness of dependence it brought her.

There we were, two women, one completely mentally and physically disabled, the other sound in body and mind, yet by herself she also is completely disabled. Both are on equal footing as we come before God. I had such an awareness that we were on the same plane... My hands were empty, and I recognized my nothingness as I held hands with Ann and we were one.

Someone asked why this person did not wear latex gloves when she was massaging Ann with oil, but that represented a deterrent to human contact.

By wearing them, I would imply I need to protect myself from the other as if the other has some kind of contagion or something I do not want to touch.... By not wearing gloves, we touch skin to skin. I embrace Ann's humanity in all its frailty and weakness and in all its dignity and mystery. Thus I also embrace myself, accepting myself as I am. In touching her hands and feet I also touch who I am. Wearing gloves would be a kind of rejection, rejecting the human condition of weakness and death, and along with that, rejecting hope and resurrection. I am so glad that when God became incarnate, he did not come wearing latex gloves.

Ann indeed now embodies more explicitly the reality of our mortality as well as the fact of vulnerability and the possibility of loss. In the hospital once, her room was ironically near the "birth center." Once more, birth and death interweave. Another friend who sat with her for a while most days, wrote this.

Death lies on the bed with you

While life births next door.
Where am I?
Between death and life?

How does it feel to encounter death that has been uninvited?
Is it like the death I know?
The death I feel in my tired legs?
The death I feel in my pain-filled back?
The death I feel in the depths of despairing moments?

Your death holds you down to a bed or chair.
Your death restrains your speech.
Your death makes a mess out of your waste system.
Your death seems out of control,
Mine controlled,
At least to all outer appearances.

Your death gets crazy sometimes.
It seems to want to own you.
It seems to want to take you away.
But instead lets you live with it.

Death and life together, unbound,
In you and in me.
We live in light of death.
We breathe and move through life in spite of death.

Part of us wishes to face the reality of vulnerability and loss and death, but another part of us wishes to continue in denial. Further, the fact that a life such as Ann's fudges that distinction between life and death makes us feel uncomfortable. I wonder whether the instinct to encourage the demise of a person who embodies these realities and who fudges that distinction is saying something self-serving, as much as it is expressing a concern to release the other person from their suffering. In yielding to the instinct, we might then be refusing this person the opportunity to fulfill their vocation, to bring fruit out of their loss. The friend who wrote the poem I have just quoted said, "I don't think she has finished with me yet."

Perhaps the time may come when we should free Ann to go to be with Jesus. But we must make sure we are not cutting short her fulfillment of her vocation when we think about doing so. So when the crisis comes, or when the curve seems to be virtually touching the base line, my thinking at the moment is that we must again ask, "Has Ann now fulfilled her vocation?" Does she still seem to be exercising a ministry? Perhaps, for instance, she will reach a point when her life causes her such discomfort that we can no longer sense that she wants to minister to us, or that God wants her to do so, or that we want to ask her to do so.

Another friend described to me the process of her father's dying. Ironically, he was a man who had preached powerfully about the reality of resurrection life, but in the end was afraid of dying—not afraid of being dead, but afraid of dying. He clung onto life, until his body finally refused to cooperate any longer. In some respects, Ann is the mirror image of that. When she recovered so swiftly from the first bout of pneumonia, someone commented that she is a fighter, and I agreed (though above I credited the fighting to the antibiotics). Perhaps it is her body that is fighting, instinctively. Perhaps Ann is easy

about whether she goes to be with Jesus or stays here to be with us, like Paul. It is her body that insists on staying (the bits of it that still work), and the technology aids and abets it. When her spirit is less equivocal, perhaps we shall need to stop giving her body this support.

I have been tempted to think that one of the greater ways in which I have failed Ann is in failing to discuss her dying when she was capable of taking part in a discussion. No doubt that happened partly because I funk'd it, as many people do. But it also happened because the question stole up on us, as it does for many people (Singer says something similar about his mother in the *New Yorker* profile). Gradually she lost the ability to take part in a discussion about anything, and the process was well under way before I could have realized that we needed to have had that conversation before. Once or twice—well, twice, in connection with these two recent occasions when I thought she might be dying—I have talked *to* her about the fact that I had been afraid that she was dying, and about the fact that eventually this time would come. I have told her that I guessed maybe she thought about that sometimes and worried about it, but/and that I promised to be with her then, till the end, and at the end, and that the God who cared for her now would be continuing to care for her. I did that partly because (another friend bade me recognize) she was indeed herself likely thinking about these questions, and the risks of not talking about them exceeded the risks of doing so.

Realizing that many (most?) people are likely to find that it is suddenly too late to have those conversations about when to let death have its way made me think I had better have them with my sons about myself. But then I realized that there was an unreality about the enterprise. How could I now envisage the circumstances in which the questions may arise? And how could I imagine what I would want in these circumstances?

And actually the same would have been true for Ann and me. If we had had those conversations five years ago, we could not have imagined the kind of circumstances we might find ourselves in. Or rather, we could have imagined all sorts of scenarios, perhaps, but could have exhausted ourselves in the unreality of trying to formulate a response to them, not knowing which would be real. So I am now not feeling so guilty about not having had those bits of the conversation with Ann. In our case, at least, the decisions that have to be taken are ones that we could not have anticipated if we had had the conversations at the point when they were possible. And what I now want to say to my sons is something like this. You may have to judge whether a time has come when you should let death have its way with me, confident that I am going to be with Jesus. The kind of question I want you to ask is, does Dad seem to have fulfilled his vocation? Even if he has lost faculties, is he perhaps content (perhaps I will be able to spend a lot more time listening to rock 'n' roll when I can no longer write theological books) (tell no one that I listen to rock 'n' roll while I write theological books), and still nevertheless ministering in some way?

Things were simpler in the days when we did not have opportunity to control the destiny of another person in the way that is now possible. But for better or for worse, that is what to some extent we now do—beginning from the moment of birth, or from the first time we give a child antibiotics. We decide whether to keep them alive or whether to let them die. I hope I find Ann peacefully dead in bed before we have to think some more about that.

23 Postscript

When I was discussing with an editor the U.S. edition of this book, he suggested that people would want to know what had happened since I wrote the first edition, when

we were in the midst of our risky move to California. So I have done so. The trouble is that anyone with such curiosity will still have the same reaction, because our story has not come to an end. In a sense our human stories never do. That is one of the reasons why we like novels and movies. They usually have endings (“closure”), and they reassure us that this may also be true of our own stories. The Bible stories have little closure (look at Genesis-Kings, or Mark, or Acts, for instance), but they imply that their story contains the promise of closure even though they cannot know what that will look like. Our own unfinished stories are set in the context of those stories and they share their promise.

Notwithstanding that, I thought I should tell you about what happened in 2008. In March for several weeks Ann was in some discomfort and seemed agitated. Eventually she was again diagnosed with pneumonia. After a week or two it seemed that the two forms of antibiotic she had been given were not having any great effect. I have indicated that one of the main questions I bear in mind as I think about prolonging Ann’s life is the fact that she has a ministry, precisely in her weakness. So the question becomes, do we prolong that ministry? When does it come to an end? But given the discomfort and agitation, I found myself saying to God, “I don’t have it in me any longer to prolong this ministry. I shall not ask for yet more antibiotics. If you want her still to exercise it, you will either have to give me a sign, or do it yourself.”

I then had good conversations with Steven and Mark about the situation. Steven told me how he had just been reading the *Chronicles of Narnia* with his son. There the boy resists the witch’s suggestion that he should give the apple to his mother who is sick rather than giving it to the lion as the lion said. The lion confirms that the apple would have brought healing to the boy’s mother, but says it would not have brought her happiness in the long run. Then next day Ann’s nurse said that the trouble with more antibiotic was that it might do damage in the long run. I wasn’t asking for divine confirmation, only for divine disconfirmation, but I got the thing I wasn’t asking for.

So on the Friday I did not ask for more antibiotic. Whether she recovered was between her and God. Thereupon she started to improve. I took her off the oxygen on Sunday, and a couple of days later the doctor pronounced her quite well. She was actually brighter and more alert than she had been for some weeks.

A day or two later again, we went to the seminary chapel service, as we usually do. It happened to be Communion. The hall is stepped so we can’t take Ann to the front on such an occasion, and I asked one of the student ministers to come and pray with her (of course she can’t physically receive the bread and wine). The next day she emailed me:

I wanted to share with you a reflection I had yesterday during the chapel service/Lord’s Supper. When I touched Ann to pray for her and offer her the Body of Christ, she jolted – I really felt she knew me, and was responding to this offering of Christ that we were extending. It was a deeply relational moment for me – I felt she gave me a small gift, an offering of life to our body of Christ – and a reminder to me that God embraces me through my limited and broken self. I thought of it later in the context of the sermon, about recognizing signs of life in the midst of tragedy, sickness, and the like. I felt deeply sorrowful, I remembered your sorrow, yet God’s presence with us in blessing Ann, and God’s reaching out to me through Ann.

I emailed back the story above, which she knew nothing of, and added “I knew that God had acted to keep that ministry going. And you just testified to it.”